ONE PIECE Novel
Ace’s Story Side B
New World
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Summary
After an undersea tangle with mermaids and fish-men, Portgaz D. Ace leads his Spade Pirates crew to the New World, a place where pirate masters rookies battle for territory and treasure. As he flees memories of his secret past,

Ace seeks pirating infamy so powerful it will change the world order. To achieve this goal, he sets his sights on one of the strongest fleets in the ocean — the Whitebeard Pirates, ruled over by dread pirate Whitebeard, the strongest man in the world.

I am a pirate, and my fists turn to fire.

Prologue

Three years before the pirate named Monkey D. Luffy left on a voyage of his own, this is the story of Luffy's foster brother, Portgaz D. Ace...

Gold Roger was the only man in history to conquer the Grand Line and become King of the Pirates. Enough time has passed since his death for an infant to grow into a man.

It is the Great Age of Piracy, a time of adventure and seafaring in search of Roger's

legendary treasure, the One Piece.

There are as many pirates on the sea as stars in the sky, and the most powerful of all of them are called Emperors of the Sea for the way they rule over the New World. Together, they are called the Four Emperors.

The World Government attempts to counterbalance the Emperors' expanding power by establishing the

Navy Headquarters at Marineford, and establishing a team of privateers called the Seven Warlords who have the legal right to pillage.

If these three great powers are thrown out of balance, the world's uneasy peace would come crumbling down.

The greater each faction's power becomes, and the more they fight, the more precarious the future seems. Power and governance, alliance and betrayals—the

world is in a state of both peril and excitement, shining with the allure of the unknown and driven by the engine of greed.

In other words, it is an age of that which knows no bounds—the dreams of humanity.

A prow in the shape of a white whale splits the waves. The massive ship that followed it cruised through the choppy sea.

"*Gura ra ra ra*..."

In the captain's cabin, the man who commanded the ship sank back into his chair and chuckled heavily.

"*Portgaz D. Ace of the Spade Pirates*!"

"*Refuses to join the Seven Warlords*!"

"Feisty kids in the Grand Line these days. *Gura ra ra ra*... So he turned down an offer to join the Seven Warlords, eh?" he said.

A promising rookie pirate fought off a Navy vice admiral and set sail from the Sabaody Archipelago on a ship coated for undersea travel. The newspaper contained an article about it with a picture of the pirate.

"D..." the captain murmured, rubbing the white hairs growing on his face. "How many years've these guys been around? Why's a young guy like this in such a rush?"

“I’m coming in, Pops,” said a man carrying a tray, as he walked through the cabin doorway. He wore a white cook’s apron, knee-length pants, and a cook’s tie—he was clearly the ship’s kitchen master.

“Hey, Thatch. The sea turtle soup was fantastic.”

“Sea turtle? Today’s soup was sea viper.”

“Right, that’s the one. It’s got my stomach on fire.”

"That's because it's a stamina-building soup and it's packed with nutrients! This is your after-dinner medicine," said Thatch the cook, leaving the medicine on the table along with some hot water.

"What?"

"You've got another pill to take, starting today. And you'd *better* take it."

"Who are you, my doctor?"

"If you don't take that, Pops, the ship's doc will yell at me instead. Your health is

everybody’s concern,” said Thatch.

The man he called Pops grudgingly picked up the pill from the table, stuck it in his mouth, and washed it down with the water. “Tastes like crap.”

“Well, you know what they say about good medicine. Drink more water to wash it down your throat.”

“Who are you, my mother?”

“The Fourth Division of the Whitebeard Pirates is in

charge of the kitchen!” Thatch said. Then he clapped his hands with recollection. “Oh, by the way, I heard that Jimbei is returning.”

“What? He already left?”

“No, but he said he didn’t need a send-off.”

“Nonsense.” The man stood up from his chair.

He cut a bold figure; he’d been a major rival of Gold Roger, King of the Pirates. He was at the ripe age of around seventy, but his momentum

was greater than ever as an Emperor of the Sea with territory in the New World. His Jolly Roger was a skull bearing his long white mustache, and if anyone was foolish enough to raid a land that flew that flag, his sixteen division commanders and the dozens of smaller pirate crews affiliated with the fleet—a force of tens of thousands—would come bearing down.

He was Edward Newgate.

The world’s strongest man, known to most as the dread pirate Whitebeard.

His strength was enough to set the earth and sea trembling, and crumble an entire island.

Newgate left his captain’s quarters and stood on the deck.

Night air caressed his skin. The pitch-black sea was all around, leaving only stars, moon, and Log Pose to point the ship’s way. So how did the

fish find their direction? They must have some special sense that humans didn’t. The same for fish-men.

“Hey, Jimbei.”

“Whitebeard... Pops!” said a man at the ship railing. He’d been about to jump into the water, by the look of it.

The man was ten feet tall. He was Jimbei, First Son of the Sea, a whale shark fish-man.

The fish-man race could breathe under water, and their

physical capabilities were far beyond the average human's. They weren't an entirely different species, however; they could bear children with ordinary human beings.

"You were just gonna slip away?" Whitebeard smirked. He wanted a proper goodbye.

Jimbei felt embarrassed. He walked across the deck toward Whitebeard and looked *up* at him.

"Well, I've been summoned to Marineford."

“By Sengoku?”

“Yes.”

Jimbei was a member of a fish-man pirate crew that had been antagonistic to humans. His bounty was 250 million berries at the time—but now he was on the side of the World Government.

“The Navy’s fleet admiral seems to think pretty highly of Boss Jimbei,” said Thatch, approaching with a lantern.

"I suppose so, Thatch. But these Warlords are all so mercenary."

"You're about the only one who shows up at Navy HQ, aren't you? Boa Hancock the Kuja empress is one thing, but then you've got Doflamingo, and that slimy Croc—all those Warlords are only concerned with their own personal business."

"I took my position in exchange for amnesty for the

fish-man people. I consider it a responsibility."

That was why Jimbei, as a member of the Seven Warlords, hesitated to spend too much time on the ship belonging to Whitebeard, a rival Emperor of the Sea, even though they'd known each other for years.

"You're so dutiful about such things, Boss Jimbei."

"Well, with his troubles filling the hole in the group, I'm sure Fleet Admiral

Sengoku needs all the help he can get."

"Speaking of that," Whitebeard said, handing Thatch a newspaper. The front page article was illuminated by the lantern.

"A rookie pirate turned down an offer to join the Warlords?" Thatch murmured in wonder.

"Do you know that boy?" asked Whitebeard.

Jimbei peered at the paper. "I've heard things... His

bounty posters have been making the rounds. They say he has Logia powers. Flame, from what I hear."

"It says he caused some trouble at the Sabaody Archipelago. Do you suppose he's coming here, then, to the New World?" Thatch wondered, looking to Jimbei first, then Whitebeard.

"Well, I didn't mean to hold you up. So long, Jimbei. Good travels."

"Same to you, Pops."

Whitebeard waved a hand and returned to his cabin.

Boom...

The sea rumbled. A small red explosion appeared on the far horizon. Perhaps a volcano erupting in the distance? Thatch and Jimbei were briefly distracted by the phenomenon.

“Thatch... How’s old Whitebeard doing?”

“He’s doing great. At the very least, he hasn’t gotten any worse.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Jimbei, the relief apparent on his face.

“Of course, no human being will stay in exactly the same condition as they age. If you lose your fine sense of taste, you’ve got to be careful not to season too much. Don’t want to oversalt the food...”

“Maybe it’s not my place to say this, Thatch, but take care of Whitebeard. My people owe him a great debt.”

"I know, Boss Jimbei," said Thatch, taking his hand. "Everyone knows about Pops."

"Good. I've got to go now."

"Be careful out there... Oh, and if you learn anything about this kid from the newspaper, let us know."

"Of course. You don't disregard a youngster who spurns the Seven Warlords to go into the New World..."

There was no saying what such a person was thinking or what he might do.

Portgaz D. Ace.

With one last rumination on that name, Jimbei leapt over the railing of the ship. His massive form plunged into the water and promptly disappeared into the darkness of the sea.

Chapter One

—1—

The continuous continent that rings the globe and splits it

into two halves is called the Red Line. Now, imagine there’s a perpendicular line that intersects the Red Line starting from Reverse Mountain.

That would be the Grand Line.

The Grand Line and the Red Line split the world into four seas: the East Blue, West Blue, South Blue and North Blue. Two windless stretches parallel to the Grand Line called the Calm Belt separate

it from those seas and prevent sea travel across them. Thus the world has five major seas, with the Grand Line as a central axis.

About eight hundred years ago—over a period called the Hundred-Year Void, according to the Ponegliffs—a great kingdom was laid to waste by twenty kings and their clans. Those kings enacted a new World Government, and ruled over the capital city of Marijoa

as a new sovereign class—the Celestial Dragons.

This story is simply cobbled together from the theories of renowned historians and those exiled from the sacred capital; the truth is quite unclear. All texts and records have been lost to time, and the only medium relating the voices of the past are words carved into ancient stone that is not broken down by the elements.

At present, the government’s order is

preserved by the Navy’s military power through the ultimate authority of the Five Elders, who serve at the pleasure of the supreme class, the Celestial Dragons. Member nations of the World Government acquire rights, responsibilities, and security through attendance at the council meeting known as the Reverie. But unaffiliated countries and lands exist in more remote regions. The most distant of these are the

territories of the Four Emperors, with occasional examples of dual affiliation, such as member states that are also under the influence of major pirates.

—2—

Sacred Marijoa is along the Red Line on the opposite side of the world from Reverse Mountain. Ten thousand meters directly below it is an underwater cave on the

seafloor that acts as a relay point between the first half of the Grand Line and the second half, known as the New World.

This relay point is none other than the Ryugu Kingdom, often called Fish-Man Island.

The main island of Ryugu Kingdom was inside a gigantic air bubble. At the end of the little interior harbor, a ship that had been coated for undersea travel was docked.

Up above was a smaller bubble containing King Neptune’s palace, connected to the island by special travel tubes.

“I’ve never witnessed such a sight… It’s so beautiful…my word…” muttered a masked man, jotting notes in a little memo book.

It was light, pale orange from the sunset.

The grand sun tree, Eve, stood over ten thousand meters tall and brought the

light from the surface down to the seafloor through its trunk. It was nearly nighttime up there. Down here, inside a special, resilient bubble made from tree sap, the combination of light and oxygen supported a unique ecosystem. Coral, plants, even forests—ten thousand meters below the surface, Fish-Man Island was its own special biotope. Because of its oxygen, it could support not just fish-men, who could

breathe in the water, but humans as well.

" 'Beautiful, scary'... 'Maybe this is what aquarium fish feel like'..."

"Don't read that, Wallace," snapped the masked man, closing his book when someone started reading it out loud over his shoulder.

"You should let me read that sometime, Deuce. What d'you call it, an adventure journal? Mihal taught me how to read."

Wallace was the curious type. His spiked fins made him look menacing and mature, but in fact he was closer to boyhood. He was a weedy stingfish fish-man.

"It's good that you're learning. But this is more of an outline for my own benefit than something to show others. I'll look for a good, proper adventure book to give you later."

“Books are rare on Fish-Man Island. The water ruins the paper.”

“I see. Yes, that’s a very clever observation.”

The man in the mask—appropriately named Masked Deuce—liked to write story ideas in his book, too. His dream was to write a nautical adventure novel one day, in the style of Louis Arnot’s *Brag Men*.

“At any rate, I’m glad we made it safely. They say 70

percent of human ships trying to reach Fish-Man Island sink in the process."

"Your homeland is a beautiful place, Wallace. I can see why so many pirates risk their lives for a chance to visit it."

Deuce's pirate crew was traveling the Grand Line, and after causing a major incident at Sabaody Archipelago, they had made their way under the waves with their ship properly coated. Their vessel, the *Piece*

of Spadille, successfully completed a voyage that failed 70 percent of the time and docked at Fish-Man Island. This was surely thanks to the help offered by Wallace, a former resident of the place who knew how to manage the seafloor.

"Sure, but I wasn't raised here. I grew up in the Fish-Man District."

"Huh? There are other islands?"

“You saw that enormous sunken ship on the way here, didn’t you? It’s called *Noah*…”

Next to the mammoth ship was another island, a giant clamshell in a bubble. This place was more of a slum for fish-men of low repute, such as pirates and thieves.

“A slum, huh? I guess every country is the same. That Sun crew—they were fish-man pirates, too?”

“Yes, many of them were from Fish-Man District. They

were like heroes to us street urchins. But you humans shouldn’t go anywhere near there. You’d be throwing your lives away.”

People still remembered the Sun Pirates, who became infamous enemies of humanity when they launched an attack against the Navy Headquarters itself.

Relations between humans and fish-men were not good.

Humans saw the fish-men, with their innate physical

superiority, as a threat. Some fish-men saw humans as an inferior species. So the humans, with their numerical advantage, oppressed the fish-men with the power of the World Government.

At the start of the Great Age of Piracy, a wave of human pirates rushed through Fish-Man Island on their way to the New World and abducted many young mermaids on the way. They made for preposterously

expensive slaves. The Sun Pirates were still active after the death of their captain, the fish-man hero Fisher Tiger, but several years before his successor had joined the Seven Warlords and now did the World Government's bidding. Apparently, the upshot was that Fish-Man Island was safer and more open than before. But it did nothing to solve the actual issues between humans, fish-men and mermaids.

At any rate, it wasn’t a place for pirates to linger long.

“Master Deu,” said another member of the crew, a man wearing a skull mask and an abundance of skeleton-themed accessories. He looked quite ominous.

“Hey, Skull.”

The man’s name was Skull. He loved to collect pirate gear, and one of his hobbies was boarding pirate ships he took a shine to and working as a menial deckhand as they

sailed. His knowledge about pirates was encyclopedic, and he had a better ear for the latest intel than a beat writer does for a scoop.

"We finished up with the cargo. These fish-men are nicer than I expected. Rip-off prices, but still…"

"Hey, it's ten thousand meters under the sea. You've got to expect some import fees. Where are the others?"

"They rushed right off to the Mermaid Café."

“Dammit,” Deuce sighed.

One of the crowning attractions of Fish-Man Island was gorgeous mermaids. There was no end of men willing to risk their lives by diving to the bottom of the sea to fulfill their dreams of frolicking with vivacious, mostly bare-skinned young mermaids. When the only thing separating you from death was a wooden plank, this was a paradise worth

making your life’s final destination.

“You mean they went to the bottom of the sea just to visit a rip-off café? Our captain’s with them, I assume?”

Skull mumbled and took a while to find the words. “Master Ace…*was* with them…until recently.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again.”

He had wandered off. Normally, you’d call this “getting lost,” but their captain

was the type of man who claimed that the Spade Pirates were wherever he was, so he didn’t realize how bad his problem really was.

—3—

On the main part of Fish-Man Island was a residential district made of coral and stacked up like the inside of a beehive. The upper levels were more expensive, with plenty of sunlight—the

neighborhood of the wealthy, Fishverly Hills. Down below, the commoners' homes were concentrated for greater density.

And near the bottom, at a restaurant that was far from fancy, a small uproar was underway.

"What's up with him?"

"He fell asleep in the middle of eating!"

The customers whispered and murmured among

themselves, glancing occasionally at the counter.

Specifically, at a young human guest.

Despite the sunlight, Fish-Man Island was still ten thousand meters under the sea, and the surrounding water temperature was quite cold, yet the man was only wearing shorts, a hat and no shirt. It was more common to see human visitors dressed as though they were visiting a winter island.

There was also a tattoo on his arm. That wasn't rare; the vast majority of human visitors to Fish-Man Island were pirates, after all.

The young man appeared to have plunged face-first into the large plate of fish before him on the counter. In each hand was a fork with a morsel of meat stuck on the end. He was as still as the dead.

"Um…sir?" inquired a waitress.

"*Pwoa*!!"

“Ah!”

He bolted upright suddenly, looking around in utter bewilderment.

“Hmm?” He spotted the waitress, and for reasons only he could explain, used her apron to wipe his face.

“Eeek!”

“What kind of fish-man are you, Miss?” the freckled, mischievous-looking young man said, leaning in close. The waitress wasn’t entirely sure how to react.

"E…eel. [heart]"

"In that case, Miss, I'll have some more eel pie. And a mug of the bubbly stuff."

"Eeeeek!" the eel fish-man waitress shrieked, wriggling her way back to the kitchen.

"*Phew*… Oh, man," said the young man, scratching his head. "I passed out for a minute."

It was at that point that he realized he was the center of attention of the other diners. *Why did he pass out midbite?*

What kind of disorder does he have?

"Sorry for disturbing your meal, folks," he apologized, and resumed gobbling down his food.

The very odd man with the peculiarly timed courtesy confused the other guests, but they seemed willing to let it go, and turned back to the conversations at their own tables.

"Passin' out while you eat? What's that all about?"

“Hmm?” The young man raised his head.

A plate of eel pie was before him, but it hadn’t come from the waitress. It came from a fierce-looking man with his long hair tied up in the back.

“So I got a ship, right? There are tough guys on board, smart guys on board, but there’s one thing we’re missing.”

“What’s that?”

“We don’t have a cook. So when I get to eat at a

delicious place like this, my heart passes out from joy."

"Heh… Gee, thanks."

"What kind of fish-man are you, Mister?"

"I'm a goatsbeard brotula *merman*, actually. And before you ask, we're out of brotula today."

"Mmm," murmured the young man, popping the fresh-baked pie, which featured several eel heads, directly into his mouth.

Indeed, the merman’s lower half ended in fishy fins.

“You’re a bold young pirate to be here all alone,” said the goatsbeard brotula merman from across the counter.

“Oh yeah? Hey, this is tasty.”

“Haven’t you heard about the recent attacks at Fish-Man Island? Happens to human pirates, and even some fish-men who cooperate with humans.”

“Sounds violent… Yeah, this is some good eel.”

“Hey. Listen to me.”

“So who’s attacking who?” the young man asked as he ate.

“It started years ago. Queen Otohime of Ryugu Kingdom lost her life,” explained the merman, wiping a glass with a rag.

He described how, until about two hundred years ago, fish-men and mermen were classified as “fish” by humans.

That was when the Ryugu Kingdom was finally allowed to join the World Government and attend the Reverie, the meeting of world leaders. But the humans continued to despise the fish-men, and naturally, the fish-men did not take kindly to humans, either.

Queen Otohime spoke passionately about coexisting with the humans, and gathered signatures for her petition.

"Queen Otohime really wanted us to find harmony with you humans. But someone who didn't take kindly to that idea assassinated her."

"Ah…"

The young man glanced at the wall. There was a wanted poster there, but not the bounty posters that the World Government and the Navy sent out. This one was only for within the Ryugu Kingdom.

The wanted man’s name was Vander Decken.

“And that guy did it?” the young man asked, pointing to the poster.

“No…he’s a different case.”

There was a legend of the sea passed down by many a sailor. One stormy day a pirate captain went mad and hurled his crew overboard, drowning them. God was furious about the captain’s actions and sentenced him to eternal

torment, doomed to wander the sea forever.

Dead men's fingers have no need for jewels. The darkness hides even their regrets.

Find it! Find it! The sunken treasure is mine for the taking.

I'm the richest man in the world. Captain Vander Decken!

It was the tale of a famous ghost ship that wandered the

seafloor, known as the *Flying Dutchman*.

"Whatever generation of Vander Decken we're on now…in any case he's a pirate fish-man who ate a Devil Fruit. Who ever heard of doing such a thing?"

Devil Fruits were thought of as personifications of the devils of the sea. Anyone who took a bite of one would gain strange and mighty powers—able to transform into powerful beasts and birds, or

turn their bodies into blades or bombs, or even become natural phenomena like fire and ice…

"A Devil Fruit, huh?"

There was one major cost, a curse the Devil Fruit conferred. In exchange for its power, the person who possessed that power became an enemy of the sea. Not only did their powers no longer function if they fell into the sea, but they lost even the

strength to swim or float on their own.

"Somethin' funny about that?"

"You gotta admit, a fish-man who can't swim is pretty funny," the young man said, snorting at the wanted pirate named Vander Decken.

"The late Queen Otohime had three sons and one daughter. And would you believe it, that shameless Vander Decken asked the

daughter, Princess Shirahoshi, to marry him.”

“Whoa. Is it a crime to ask someone to marry you here?”

“It is if you’re an undesirable stalker. He keeps trying to coerce her into accepting his request.”

Long story short, the fish-man pirate Vander Decken the Somethingth, a man who couldn’t swim, was using his Devil Fruit powers to threaten the Princess Shirahoshi and the Ryugu

royal family. In order to shelter from his power's attacks, she'd been forced into hiding for years in a palace called Shell Tower.

"Sounds violent."

"These are the times we live in."

"What's the king doing, then? He's gotta be pretty tough if he's the king, right? Can't he keep his own daughter safe?"

"Eh?"

“If he can’t, sounds like he could be at imminent risk of a coup d’état,” observed the young man, taking another sip of his drink.

“Watch what you say around here, youngster.” The bartender stopped wiping his glass.

“Sorry. My bad. I’m a pirate; an outsider. Doesn’t matter to me what happens in places I’m just passing through,” said the man, chowing down on one of the

eel heads from the pie. He had an appetite as ravenous as flames licking across grassland in a drought.

"You mentioned a coup. That's not gonna happen. There are two men who would quickly attend to any such attempts."

"Two?" said the young man, his voice perked with interest for the first time at what the merman had to say. The air positively crackled with tension. He was about six feet

tall and in his late teens. His freckled face and lithe figure still had a boyish look, but it was clear he was not one to be taken lightly.

"A man you humans call Jimbei, First Son of the Sea. He works as one of the Seven Warlords."

"Seven Warlords…"

"Speakin' of which, they were talkin' about some wild young rookie who just turned down an offer to join that group. Anyway, the only

reason Jimbei's there is because of the Sun Pirates, a group started by the abolitionist hero Fisher Tiger, who—"

"I'm not interested in the past." The young man lifted his glass and held it across the counter for more. The brotula merman filled it from the barrel behind him, glaring.

"And who's the other one? Who's really ruling Fish-Man Island? The king? A Warlord?" asked the young man, gazing

at the fresh suds on the refilled mug.

"Edward Newgate."

That was a name that carried weight.

"Fish-Man Island is in the territory of Whitebeard, Emperor of the Sea. King Neptune's an old friend of Whitebeard's. So there won't be any coups here."

The customers of the restaurant began to murmur among themselves.

“Did you see the Whitebeard Pirates’ flag flying over the harbor?”

“I’ll never forget that day! He just said the word and suddenly messing with Fish-Man Island was off-limits!”

“Whitebeard protects this island with his flag and his name!”

“We trust Whitebeard the pirate more than we do the World Government!”

Emboldened by their drinks, the fish-man customers continued to praise his name.

The goatsbeard brotula merman spoke about the day that Edward Newgate arrived. It was not long after the start of the Great Age of Piracy, when Fish-Man Island found itself ravaged by a storm of pirates.

"*I owe Neptune from our younger days*," said Whitebeard, placing his flag

over Fish-Man Island in honor of his connection to their king, with whom he'd shared drinks and friendship.

The other pirates were stunned; they'd been enjoying all the pillaging they wanted. And here he was, the world's strongest pirate.

"Why's he on the fish-men's side?!"

"Quit ransackin' my friend's kingdom, you snot-nosed punks!"

“I declare Fish-Man Island to be my territory!”

With that simple statement, Fish-Man Island was safe at last. No pirate who visited would dare engage in kidnapping or pillaging. They could only be peaceful visitors, paying proper respect to Whitebeard as the code of honor demanded.

“Whitebeard, huh?”

The young man tilted back his mug and drained the rest of his drink. It was almost as

though he meant to drink down Whitebeard himself.

"*Phew*. Thanks for the meal." The young man slammed his mug down on the counter and stood up.

"What's your name, young man?" called out the brotula merman.

The man turned back and gave him a brief glance.

"I'm just a wild young rookie. The one from your story, in fact."

Silence.

"I'm Portgaz D. Ace. Even here at the bottom of the sea, you're going to be hearing my name a lot, whether you want to or not."

The restaurant was completely silent.

"Ace…" said the merman. "What's the deal with that tattoo, then?" He pointed at the young man's left arm.

The tattoo there read ASCE, but with the S crossed out. Was it possible that a person

could get their own name as a tattoo *and* spell it wrong?

Portgaz D. Ace just smiled as if to say, *Don't ask stupid questions*. He left the restaurant without another word.

The customers looked to the brotula merman, stunned.

"Aladdin…"

"It's hard to get a read on him. Is he really so bold, or ignorant, or just plain stupid?"

There wasn't a pirate alive who wouldn't shiver at the

mention of the name Whitebeard. Especially not a rookie.

Even one with a bounty of nine digits making his way through Fish-Man Island to the New World wouldn’t be foolish enough to cause trouble in Whitebeard’s territory.

The merman Aladdin, a member of a fish-man pirate crew, just crossed his arms and frowned. “Now, what shall I tell Jimbei?”

“Ah!” the eel waitress gasped.

“What’s wrong?”

“That customer just left without paying…”

“*What*?”

—4—

There was an old law among fish-men that they would never share their blood with humans.

That meant no transfusions. It was usually the humans

who shunned the idea of fish-man blood anyway. The hero Fisher Tiger died because no human would give their blood to save him, it was said.

As it happened, a secret syndicate was operating in the shadows of Fish-Man Island. They targeted not only humans, but also the fish-men who dared to work with them.

Up on the surface, “human shops,” where slaves were bought and sold, were common targets of terrorist

activities. And fairly solid evidence indicated that this secret society was behind those attacks, too.

"And when the shop went up in smoke, so did all the humans!"

"Praise the hero! Raise a toast! Serves those humans right!"

In the Fish-Man District, children like Wallace grew up hearing the adults around them praise those who carried out the terrorist attacks.

Performing terrorist acts made you a hero. It was almost as though they were competing to see just how much human blood they could shed.

"*This is a holy war*!"

It was at the height of this movement that Queen Otohime, who argued for harmony with humankind, was assassinated.

Whitebeard's flag might have protected the fish-man people from pirates, but in the end, it only obscured the

problems the fish-men were dealing with among themselves.

"The sun's so far from this place," Ace murmured, looking up at the tremendous height of the sun tree, Eve.

He didn't have connections to the places he passed through, and he wouldn't get involved. However, he knew that no matter how hard the fish-men tried to avoid facing the twisted hatred they harbored within themselves,

and no matter how dutifully the queen had collected signatures in an attempt to paper over the crude reality of the situation, this would come to no good.

Hatred dulls the eyes of those infected by it, and warps their hearts before they realize what has happened.

Queen Otohime was killed by the personification of the hatred that dwelt in Fish-Man Island for generations upon generations. The humans were

not the only enemy the fish-men had. They were also their own enemies…

At the harbor of Fish-Man Island…

"Deuce has gone to procure some supplies," said Mihal, the ship watchman, when Ace returned to the *Piece of Spadille*.

Mihal had an unusual past for a pirate: he was a former teacher. As he was the eldest, the other crewmates called

him “Teach,” and he taught those who couldn’t even read a newspaper headline how to read and write. He was also a crack shot with a rifle.

“That guy’s always in a hurry. Of course, he can’t do anything unless he’s thoroughly prepared for it,” Ace chuckled.

Masked Deuce was the kind of person who felt the need to gather water, reserve food supplies, make a sturdy ship, and even check the weather

ahead of time before he tried to get himself off a deserted island in distant seas.

"And you take too much of your fate into your hands when you go, Ace."

"You think so? Well, if you average us out, we're just about right, then. Where are the others?"

"Learning lessons of adulthood at the Mermaid Café."

“Oh, they went there?! Why didn’t they invite me?” Ace griped.

“They said that it wouldn’t be any fun if the captain was there and hogged all the attention for himself. Though Skull is trying to figure out the Navy’s next moves.”

“The Navy?”

“Information tends to disperse here at Fish-Man Island. It’s not likely that the World Government will sit idly by and allow a rookie who

refused to join the Seven Warlords pass through without comment.”

“Ugh. That whole thing is such a pain,” Ace sighed, spitting out the toothpick he’d been chewing.

The Five Elders had summoned Ace to join the Seven Warlords at Sabaody Archipelago, but he’d refused—and, sure, it’s also possible he’d demolished a Navy officer in the process. The officer was all talk, a vice

admiral for show, but the higher-ups at the Navy didn't like having their dignity sullied like that.

Something pounced onto the deck.

It was an animal, a cat. A rare species of lynx the size of a full-grown panther. In its jaws was a bloodied, grotesque-looking deep-sea fish.

"*Grrrr*…*meow*."

"Hey, Kotatsu. Looks like you got yourself a treat." Ace

scratched the neck of the fish-bearing wildcat named Kotatsu, who sidled up to him. The giant cat purred contentedly. Either he'd found the fish at the harbor, or gotten it from one of the fish-man fishers since it was unlikely to sell.

Ace had picked up Kotatsu during his travels. The cat had been caught in a trap set by poachers looking for sideshow creatures, and Ace rescued him. Because of that, he was

wary around people, but was very protective of Ace. When it got cold, he always came looking for Ace and wouldn't leave his side.

"Looks like we've got our dinner for tonight," said Mihal, peering at the deep sea fish in Kotatsu's jaws.

"Her special pirate stew, huh?"

"Yep."

"Speaking of which, how's the cook search going? Are we putting out the call? We gotta

do something about the Spade Pirates' biggest weakness."

"Weakness? Yes, the food is terrible." Mihal wiped his glasses. "You'd be hard pressed to call her pirate stew food…"

They were referring to Banshee, a genial and masculine-looking pirate. Without a cook on the ship, she had no choice but to take over the cooking. All she knew how to do was boil or roast or serve food raw, with no

seasoning beyond a dash of salt.

"Just between you and me…I ate better when I was with the bandits," said Ace, recalling his childhood on Mt. Corvo.

"There are limited options for cooking at sea, and we're a group of men with no domestic skills… Plus, it's not as though she's our mother."

"And if you complain, she'll cave in your skull with her iron ladle. Er, sorry, ma'am. We

always appreciate your cooking," Ace said, apologizing to the woman who wasn't there.

A voice called up from below, and he leaned over the side railing. Down on the pier was a scowling Deuce. Skull was with him, too.

"Where were you wandering around, Ace?"

"I was getting food, that's all." Ace hopped down onto the pier.

“Well…fine. Once we load up the supplies, we should set sail.”

“Wait! I haven’t been to the Mermaid Café yet.”

“You don’t have to.”

Deuce grabbed the back of Ace’s collar before he could sneak off. Wallace had already gone to the Mermaid Café to summon all the idiots back to the ship.

“C’mon, a little more time won’t hurt. I wanna see the mermaids, too.”

"You see a mermaid all the time… C'mon, the Navy's on the move. We're being pursued."

"Really?"

"Really."

Deuce held out a piece of paper.

DEAD OR ALIVE! *Portgaz D. Ace*!

It was a Navy wanted poster, the latest version.

"One, ten, hundred, thousand…"

"You're over a hundred million. It's gone up. The World Government won't show mercy to anyone who dares refuse their Warlord offer and shows them up."

A bounty amount did not always correspond directly to combat strength. According to some, it was the measure of danger posed to the World Government. Therefore, pirates active on the Grand Line tended to have higher bounties than those in remote

regions, and defying the government or inflicting harm on Celestial Dragons meant retribution in the form of significantly higher bounties, as a deterrent to others.

"Ha ha."

"It's not funny," Deuce said, scowling harder.

"Really? I think this is fun."

"Yeah, of course you do. That's what you're like," Deuce said, realizing that it was pointless to explain.

The two met on the deadly lost island of Sixis in the East Blue and escaped from there together. Ace and Deuce formed the Spade Pirates, and had taken the crew this far already. The captain’s bounty was a reflection of that—an appraisal of all they’d done together.

He’d done enough of making a name for himself as a rookie. The time for standing out was over. From this point on, the crew would have to

keep winning and surviving in the New World, on the sea where only the real pirates stuck around.

Deuce was worried. All of his preparations were the result of his own sense of anxiety.

But Ace didn’t have worries like that. He had no fear of being eaten up and spat out. He shone and burned as reliably as the sun did, every single day. That was why for

Deuce—and for everyone else—Ace was…

"Um, huh?!" Deuce stammered.

Ace was looking up at the flag that flew large and proud over Fish-Man Island harbor.

The Jolly Roger of Whitebeard.

I declare Fish-Man Island to be my territory, said Edward Newgate, Emperor of the Sea. And with that one statement, he kept the pirates away from the island.

His pirate flag represented his promise. And without fear, Ace reached up for that flag.

"Don't, you idiot!" Deuce hissed at him. "Don't go picking fights for no reason. Why would you make us *more* enemies?"

"If you can't keep up, you can stay behind."

"Uh…"

"Stay here and chase mermaids. I won't turn away anyone who wants to be here—I've taken on those who

aren’t even pirates. But what we’re facing…it’s a voyage to reach the pinnacle of piratehood. I can only use people with the will to fight. Who fights for no reason? If we can’t surpass the Four Emperors, why aim for the top at all?”

A small flame appeared in Ace’s palm. That was a power granted by his Devil Fruit—the Logia-type Flame-Flame Fruit. The fact that he’d bitten into

that fruit meant he could turn himself into flame.

"Fine, I get it. But still, Ace—don't."

"Boss, if you burn that flag, there are more than a dozen commanders in the Whitebeard Pirates with dozens of other crews under them who will all want to destroy us forever," warned Deuce and Skull.

"Wait, Whitebeard has that many people under him?" Ace said.

“His entire force numbers in the tens of thousands.”

“So that’s the top, huh?” Fire wreathed Ace’s form. “I’m gonna raise my flag. The flag of the Spade Pirates that will carry my renown up with it. This is the New World!”

It caught fire.

Flame engulfed the flag bearing Whitebeard’s Jolly Roger.

Just then, Wallace returned with the rest of the gang. They saw their captain turning

to fire. Many different expressions adorned their faces, but none of them were quaking with fear.

"Sheesh. Why would you make things harder for yourself like this?"

They needed to set sail again before the scene got any more out of control, Deuce realized. He started giving orders to the crew.

"What's the first thing we do in the New World?" Skull asked the captain.

“We’ll need to pay our respects.”

“I know you, Ace. You’re going to pop him in the mouth to make a name for yourself, aren’tcha?”

“Will you do me a favor, Skull? Help me make it so these Four Emperors—these people who think they’re so high and mighty in the security of their titles—can never ignore my name again.”

Skull saw the ambition burning behind his captain’s

words like the flame he embodied, and nodded quietly.

"Then let's sail…to the New World!"

With the burning flag, they would hoist the name of Portgaz D. Ace.

For fame.

There was twisted hatred in Ace's heart toward the man who was executed as the world's greatest and most infamous criminal, Gol D. Roger. It was a wordless rebellion against the father

he’d never met, a figure whose absence tormented him. Inside him were ugly, messy things he didn’t want to remember. Things to give to the fire, to turn into ash.

With his hands as the flames.

Ace strove to become even more famous than the King of the Pirates. He wanted enough fame to flip the history books to a new age. Enough to lead a world revolution. To do great things. Because if he didn’t

achieve this, Ace knew that his deep-rooted hatred for his father, and for the world at large, would kill him.

I will live without regrets.

He swore it with the tattoo on his left arm. And he could never let himself be contained.

Chapter Two

—1—

Deep-sea currents—the water that hits the Red Line and

sinks down to the seafloor is said to take a whole two thousand years to reach the depths and surface again. Monsters, curses, souls of the dead—the sea is greater than the life span of a human being, country, tradition, or any other artifact of human civilization. It’s an object of fear and awe.

Once through the seafloor cavern near Fish-Man Island, you’re on to the second half of the world.

From there, you grab the rising currents to take you upward, from the abyssal depths to where the light trickles down. Above a depth of a thousand meters, the near-freezing water undergoes a dramatic transformation. Once in the sea layers where temperature rises and light penetrates, when the sailors see the direct light of the sun through the sudsy layer of the ship’s coating, they realize that they’re about to be freed

from the ever-present cage of silent, deadly water pressure. With that rush comes the sense of what drove them to adventure on the sea in the first place: a yearning for and fear of the unknown, combined in an irresistible and indescribable exhilaration.

That is the light that leads to the New World.

And the majority of the pirates who survive the 70 percent failure rate of the Fish-Man Island trip find

themselves shouting something else shortly after they reach the New World:

"I don't want to die! Let's go back to Paradise!"

A Jolly Roger consisting of a flaming skull with goggles, over a spade symbol.

The *Piece of Spadille* had made the trip up from ten thousand meters under the sea, through the base of the Red Line.

“I wanna eat seaweed brûlée, seaweed tarts, seaweed soufflé…”

“Are you guys men or not?”

Ace was annoyed at how nostalgic the crew members were for the frilly, girly Mermaid Café, as a pungent stew of deep-sea fish bubbled before them.

“You don’t know, Captain Ace, you weren’t there! The singing voices of the mermaids, the delicate flavors…”

“Take a hint from Kotatsu.”

“*Grrr*…*meow*?”

Kotatsu had been given one of the deep-sea fish heads and he was crunching down on it, bones and all.

“Whose flame do you think is cooking this stew, anyway?”

“It’s all thanks to you of course, Captain. We’re sorry, Captain. Thank you, Captain.”

A huge cast-iron pot was bubbling away in the middle of the *Piece of Spadille*’s mess hall.

Firewood was a valuable resource on a ship, and also a potential fire hazard, so you had to be very careful with it—on a normal ship. The Spade Pirates, naturally, were different. Having a captain with the Flame-Flame Fruit helped in that regard. He could simply adjust the fire to the strength that was needed to help cook.

"I don't care if it looks like cat food, it's a blessing just to

get a hot meal while you're out at sea…"

"That's not a compliment, Ace."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said to Banshee. She clanged two ladles together menacingly, and the crew all went back to poking at their stew, murmuring insincerely about how delicious it was.

"About our earlier topic, Ace," Deuce muttered under his breath.

"Hmm? What was that?"

“I was asking if you were serious about meeting with him to…”

But Deuce couldn’t even finish his sentence before the lookout burst into the mess hall.

“Captain! Enemy ships!”

“Awright!” Ace shot to his feet as if he’d been hoping this would happen. The others blew on their bowls of stew and began shoveling it in, making sure they didn’t miss out on a meal.

"Listen up, boys! Forget about the underlings. Look for the real prize…a cook to recruit to our crew!"

"Yeah!" cheered the Spade Pirates.

On the horizon, lightning was raining down on a distant island.

It was still midday, but the area was choked with dark clouds. Even on the Grand Line, the New World was above and beyond the norm.

Volcanic rocks fell from the sky. Hurricanes, with several times their usual energy, were utterly destructive. Simply sailing a ship here was taking your life into your own hands.

"Give us a break…we're just trying to get out of here!" sobbed a man wearing a captain's hat, slumped on the ground before Ace.

"And you didn't bother to check our pirate flag first? Did you realize you were attacking

the Spade Pirates?” Deuce asked in the captain’s stead.

“We didn’t know! We just wanted to take your ship.”

“They got nothin’, Captain Ace!” said Skull, returning to the deck. “Their hold’s empty.”

“Not surprised. What’s with the pirate ships in the New World? They’re all cheapskates,” Ace grumbled. And it didn’t look like he was getting his cook.

“This ship’s falling apart. It’s a wonder it’s still floating. We

can’t even dismantle it for anything more than scrap wood.”

It was the third time the Spade Pirates had been attacked since entering the New World, but for some reason, all of their enemies were in tatters before the fight even started.

“We were just trying to take your ship to escape! We want to go back to Paradise! C’mon, do us a solid!”

All of them wanted to return to Paradise—back to the first half of the Grand Line, where they'd enjoyed reasonable prestige as pirates.

"Fine, fine. I've heard enough from you gentlemen. I've got no more use for you." Ace made a gun gesture with his fingers.

"H-hey, pal, what do ya say? We could be your underlings. Let us ride on your ship. And take my advice…turn

back now! Trust me, you'll want to—"

Fwum.

A ball of fire shot from Ace's extended fingertip. It burst through the enemy flag and burned it to a crisp in seconds. "Sorry, I'm not interested in your flag," he said, and gave his crew the order to withdraw.

"This is normal on the seas of the New World, apparently," muttered Deuce. "The strongest rule, the ruled

survive, and the weak who resist lose everything and have to flee."

"Sounds neat."

"To go back to what we were talking about earlier, are you serious about going to meet the Four Emperors, Ace?"

"Have I ever joked about something like that?"

"It…it's too soon! I mean, speaking of Red-Haired Shanks…"

Red-Haired Shanks's name was practically synonymous with the Great Age of Piracy. People spoke of his days of duels with Hawk-Eyes Mihawk, the greatest swordsman in the world. Even though he was missing an arm, he was considered one of the Four Emperors, alongside Edward "Whitebeard" Newgate, Charlotte "Big Mom" Linlin, and "King of the Beasts" Kaido.

"The government sources say the following about him…" If you make Red-Hair angry, he's frightening. On that note, if you broke the laws of proper courtesy, Whitebeard was frightening. If you fouled Big Mom's mood, she was frightening. Kaido's existence all on its own was frightening. But there was no saying *who* exactly was vouching for all of this information.

"I've heard rumors that Red-Hair was actually on the Pirate King's crew…"

At the time, Whitebeard and Big Mom were already powerful pirates, with Red-Hair and Kaido in the generation coming up after them. Shanks was a sailor on Gold Roger's ship, the *Oro Jackson*, where he served under the King of the Pirates directly.

"There's a story," said Ace, "going back to just before

Red-Hair lost his arm in the East Blue…”

A younger Shanks spent some time based near a little village in that distant sea. One day, there was some trouble at the bar with a mountain bandit. The bandit leader mocked him, saying pirates were scum, and dumped his bottle over Red-Hair’s head.

“What do you suppose he did, Deuce?”

“I’d bet that bandit is no longer alive.”

“You’d be wrong. Red-Hair just laughed it off, and apologized for the trouble.”

“Are you serious?”

But that wasn’t the end of the trouble. A boy from the village whom Shanks had befriended got kidnapped by the bandits. The kid wanted to be a pirate more than anything, and seeing pirates look weak made him furious, so he went to pick a fight with the bandits.

When they heard that the bandits had kidnapped the kid and hurt him, Red-Hair and his crew went and crushed the bandits. He said to them, *You can pour drinks on me, throw food at me, even spit on me, and I'll just laugh that stuff off. But whether there's good reason or not, nobody hurts a friend of mine*.

"Where'd you get this story, Boss? Even I have never heard this one."

"Have you…*met* Red-Hair before, Ace?" Deuce was from the East Blue, and that was where he'd met Ace. But that wasn't all. Ace's father was none other than the King of the Pirates, Gold Roger—but Deuce was about the only person on the crew who knew that. If Red-Hair was indeed a member of that legendary crew, then Ace would represent a link to Shanks's old captain, in fact.

"Nope," said Ace, shaking his head. "I've never met him, but I want to. I'm not interested in the Pirate King. This guy grew up in the Great Age of Piracy with a front-row seat to history, and clawed his way up to becoming one of the Four Emperors. I wanna know what drove Red-Hair to do this."

Maybe he could figure something out. Something that would put the Spade Pirates' flag over Fish-Man

Island, that place where all pirates and sailors passed through.

"I know you don't just say these things without thinking, but we're talking about an Emperor of the Sea. It's almost impossible to meet these people face-to-face."

Everything was different with the pirates of the New World.

First off, the scale was different. In Whitebeard's case, Edward Newgate was a

father figure to over ten commanders who served directly under him, along with their crew members. That alone was a huge force of over a thousand combatants, but in addition to that were dozens of affiliated pirate crews with a total manpower in the tens of thousands, and vast territorial holdings. The pirating business they maintained in that territory maintained the monumental pirate fleet.

From legitimate avenues like trade, port workers, and vendors of food and drink, to casinos, gambling, and show business, security of all kinds, weapons smuggling, even mercenary dispatches to distant wars—every kind of economic activity within the Emperor’s waters was closely related to the funds of the pirate in charge. Just the protection racket of having an Emperor’s flag over your territory could cost in the

hundreds of millions, if not more.

The first thing any new pirate did when they got to this stretch of sea was to pay their respects to one of the Four Emperors. After this one could join their operation and be safe—usually.

"Ace, we're not flying any of the Four Emperors' flags right now. Whatever your intentions are here, once they come after us, there's nothing we can do to survive."

"Did you figure out where Red-Hair is, Skull?"

"Ace, are you listening to me?"

"Oh, I know where Red-Haired Shanks is," piped up the enemy pirate captain. "Eh?"

"Red-Hair's harder to pin down than the other Emperors. Lately there have been rumors that he's based out of a certain island…" The captain then dropped the name of the place.

“You’d better not be playing games with us.”

“Hang on, Master Deu. That winter island was among the names in my intel,” claimed Skull.

“Go on, then. Go there and get yourselves killed!
Red-Hair’s not the kind of man who cares much about others. He’s kind to his friends and merciless to strangers. He’s not going to give a lick of attention to a snot-nosed punk

of a rookie with no manners like you! Aha ha ha ha!”

The defeated captain’s words hung in the air like a menacing curse.

—2—

The islands of the Grand Line each correspond to spring, summer, fall, and winter, and each type has four seasons, meaning that there are technically sixteen seasons in all. Summer on a summer

island is the hottest, and winter on a winter island is the coldest. Spring on a spring island has the greatest blooming of life, and fall on a fall island boasts the most brilliant colors of all. The Red Line is, in fact, just a great amalgamation of all of these seasonal islands. The season will change depending on which island you visit, regardless of latitude.

Flying over the cave on this winter island was the Jolly

Roger of a skull with three slashes—the symbol of the Red-Haired Pirates.

"It's a warm one today."

"Sleet outside. That's rare."

If it was warm enough to melt the snow falling on this winter island, the day was warm, indeed. The red-haired captain was the one who made the observation, and it was his first mate, Benn Beckman, who answered about the sleet.

"Days like this are usually when bad stuff happens… *Munch*, *gulp*."

"C'mon, don't start talkin' like that. You're usually right on the money about these hunches," said a man with dreadlocks, responding to the round-faced Lucky Roux, who chomped down on a huge hunk of meat on the bone like it was a little snack. People often imagined the Four Emperors living in palatial estates with every possible

luxury at their disposal. Some were like that, of course. Charlotte Linlin, the leader of the Big Mom Pirates, was a crafty old pirate whose family consisted of forty-three husbands, forty-six sons, and thirty-nine daughters. All hundred-and-twenty-nine of them and their spouses ruled over a stretch of sea called Totto Land, and Big Mom herself lived on Whole Cake Island with all the sweets she could ever want to eat.

But Shanks traveled on a diminutive dragon-headed ship called the *Red Force* with a small, elite crew, moving from place to place.

It was time to prepare for the evening meal. When the pirate feast was starting, with the serving of food they'd procured in the day's hunt, things suddenly got much noisier outside the cave. The fire that the crew was sitting around abruptly blazed much

higher, as though they'd stoked the logs.

"Well, well. Sorry for interrupting your party. I was lured here by a delicious smell."

It was a young man. He wore a cape around his shoulders and shorts around his waist. Could he really have come all the way to the cave in the midst of so much snow? And somehow, there wasn't a single flake of snow on his body.

“Were you the one making all that noise?”

The Red-Haired officers all remained seated, as though they had already known someone was coming.

I know that guy. He’s Fire Fist…the one who spurned the Seven Warlords.

“Sorry, Chief… He just showed up and said he wanted to pay his respects,” said their lookout, a new guy, as he rushed into the cave a few moments later.

“Pay respects…to me?” Shanks fed another log into the fire.

It flickered momentarily—then returned to its previous strength.

Haki.

It was a threat. But the young man took it head-on. He wasn’t so weak that this would be enough to knock him over.

“No, I don’t mean it that way!” said the young man, Fire Fist Ace. “It’s just an

introduction. Pardon me, sir, I just want to introduce myself. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance,” said Ace all of a sudden. He extended his hand, palm upward, in a sign of respect.

Shanks tilted his head in confusion at this unexpected act. He looked to his other officers. They were either frowning, or laughing, or watching with entertained looks on their faces.

"In that case…I return your greeting," said Shanks. He, too, extended an upward palm. This was a formal exchange in the underworld, an indication that each side would remain humble toward the other, without trickery. It was part of the old ways, the pirate code derived from the traditions of gamblers and yakuza and the like. But it was very old-fashioned, indeed. You didn't see many observe these formalities anymore.

“I am…uhh…I am of birth of Baterilla, South Blue. I was raised in the East Blue. My name is Ace. Though I am newly started on this path in life, I am known as Fire Fist by the world at large. My humble bounty is…uh…how much is it, again?”

“The hell should I know?”

“This guy can barely get his words out straight,” teased the others around the fire.

“For I am such a simple country boy, I may have

committed some errors of the tongue. I pleadificate for your generous forgivication… All right, boys, time to introduce the man of the hour.”

“Are you talking to your crew? Where are they?” Benn Beckman asked.

Ace spun around. There were no other members of the Spade Pirates with him.

“Oh…right. It’s just me. I didn’t want to bother you with the whole gang,” he said.

“You got a lot of nerve, you know that?”

“So what’s this little show all about, huh?” asked Shanks, looking at Ace with the little smirk he so often wore. His hand rested on the pommel of his sword. Any uninvited guest who caused trouble here was likely to get himself sliced in two.

Ace thought it over, then scratched his head, deciding that it wasn’t going to work after all. “Dangit. I practiced it

exactly the way Makino showed me. I'm just not that good at this stuff."

"Makino?" The officers and Shanks wore puzzled looks. Ace reached for his bag and pulled something out.

"A bottle?"

"This is a fine libation from the East Blue, where I grew up. Makino told me that this is how pirates offer a proper greeting."

Shanks reached out and accepted the large jug of

alcohol from Ace. He pulled out the cork and took a whiff.

"Ahh, that's a familiar scent! Brings back memories of distant grog!"

The pirates excitedly began to pass around the jugs and take swigs from it. The fact that they drank seemed to be a sign that they weren't going to slice him up right away, at least.

"Did you know that I spent some time in the East Blue years ago?"

“Yes, I heard. I lived near Windmill Village. Do you know Mt. Corvo? I was raised by some bandits who lived there.”

“Windmill Village? Well, that takes me back. How’s the mayor doing? So this booze is from Makino, eh?”

“No, actually. I bought it from a liquor store in Roguetown before I got into the Grand Line.”

“So I just did all that reminiscing for nothing?”

“Well, I did get some from Makino when I first set sail. But then I shipwrecked and washed up on a deserted island. You know, stuff happens.”

“You mean stuff that’s so stereotypical for rookie pirates that it never actually happens?” snapped one of the crewmates.

“I’m getting embarrassed for him just listening to this,” joked another, recalling his own youth.

"Well, if Makino's doing well, that's all that matters."

"I bet she's grown into a fine woman by now, eh, Captain?"

"I'd like to see that." The Red-Haired Pirates began to discuss their fond memories of Windmill Village among themselves, so Ace continued, "Anyway…my little brother says you saved his life, and all he does is talk about you, so I wanted to meet you and give my thanks."

“Brother?”

“His name’s Luffy.”

Everyone gave him a look that said, *Why didn’t you tell us that first?!*

“You’re Luffy’s?! So he had a brother?! Welcome, welcome! C’mon, sit down and tell me how he’s doing!”

Shanks clapped Ace on the shoulder and beckoned him to join the circle around the fire.

Time to party!

As the saying goes, “A night’s lodging and a meal are a favor to be owed.”

Once they’d observed the customary greeting, the underworld way of things was to welcome in a traveler with no place to stay.

“C’mon, all of you, don’t be shy! We’re having a party here!”

“Ooh, you’ve got a cat?”

“Go on, Kotatsu, show them your party trick. Jump through this fiery hoop!”

“*Grrr*…*meowww*.”

Two pirate crews met up in the cave on a winter island and carried on like old friends.

At first the Spade Pirates were intimidated by the presence of one of the Four Emperors, but once the booze started flowing, they loosened up and turned lively.

“So Luffy got left with a bunch of bandits, huh?” said

Shanks, taking a swig of his gift of grog and reminiscing about years past.

"Old Garp said it was going to shape him up so he could join the Navy," Ace explained. Luffy had been a snot-nosed little kid dropped on the doorstep of Dadan the bandit on Mt. Corvo one day. At that point he already had the Gum-Gum Fruit powers that made him able to turn to rubber.

“And he still had the straw hat?”

“Yes. It was more important to him than his own life.”

“How can something be more important than your life?”

“He said it was because he made a promise to you about it. He was keeping that straw hat for you, and would bring it back to you one day. Once he was King of the Pirates.”

They were talking about Ace’s little brother, Luffy, a

boy who befriended the Red-Haired pirates in a village where they'd once stayed. According to the story, Shanks lost his arm in the act of saving Luffy when he fell into the sea.

"So Luffy's the grandson of Garp the Hero?"

Whether he'd been aware of that fact or not, Shanks was bound to have an antagonistic history with Navy Vice Admiral Garp. Before the Great Era of Piracy began, the

counteracting power against pirates like Roger were mighty Navy officers like Sengoku the Buddha—currently the Navy's fleet admiral—and Vice Admiral Garp.

"We brothers made a pact. We each swore to go to sea when we turned seventeen."

"And how old are you, Ace?" Shanks asked. Ace told him, and the pirate began to count on his fingers.

"That would make Luffy…uh…" "He's three years

younger than me, so he'll be leaving soon. He'll catch up to me in no time."

"That'd be nice," said Shanks, giving Ace a gentle smile.

"You mentioned Roguetown. Did you see it when you were there?"

"See what?"

"The execution stand."

The place the King of the Pirates died…The place where the Age of Piracy began.

"*It's yours if you can find it. I left everything in the world there*."

The Great Age of Piracy—the great quest for the One Piece—began there, with the final words of Gold Roger before his execution.

And a young Shanks was there, in a corner of the town square in which the execution stand was built…

"Hm."

"Hm?"

"Oh, I saw it, of course. It's a tourist spot. But, unlike Luffy, I don't have any interest in the King of the Pirates," Ace said. He wasn't going to reveal the truth about his father here.

"Ahh."

"Then why'd you go to sea, Portgaz D. Ace?" asked the first mate, Benn Beckman, who was nursing his drink sip by sip.

"I knew I would set sail at the age of seventeen," he

replied. “Beyond that…I dunno. Maybe I was hoping to figure it out while at sea. Oh, but, there is one thing I knew I was going to do for sure.”

“And that is?”

“I’m going to make sure my name is heard around the world.”

Shanks did not miss the flicker of dark flame deep in Ace’s eyes as he said those words.

Wealth. Power. And…

“Fame, huh?”

"To you and the rest of the world, Gold Roger might have been a legendary figure, but to me…he's just a dead man. He'd already been executed by the time I was born."

That was why he didn't care about the man's title.

"If not as the King of the Pirates, then how do you plan to make yourself known?" Shanks asked.

"The Emperors," Ace said. "First I topple the Four Emperors."

A discordant air settled over the celebration.

"Ha ha ha," Shanks chuckled. That eased the troublesome tension, nipping it in the bud.

"Oh, er, I didn't mean it in the sense that I'd come to take you out. You've shown me warm hospitality here, and you saved my brother's life."

"Glad to hear I'm off the hook. But Roger was my captain once. Did you know that? I figured that all the

young folks these days wanted to be like the King of the Pirates. I guess that's not necessarily the case. I tell ya, it sucks to get old."

The times roil and change.

Just as Roger's generation had given way to Shanks's generation, someday these rookies would have their day—the same way that the waves—and time itself—flow ever onward.

"Sorry, I guess I made things awkward for the party."

"Well, if you don't mind indulging my curiosity, which of the Emperors are you going after? Kaido? Big Mom? It wouldn't be—"

"Whitebeard."

Red-Hair and his men stopped and stared at Ace.

Hey! He thinks he's gonna take down Whitebeard!

Whitebeard the pirate, more fearsome than a demon…

I'd die a hundred times rather than attempt a stunt like that!

This was in no way worth the trouble it would precipitate. Parents everywhere invoked Whitebeard to scare their children into behaving. His name was synonymous with a natural disaster, like a storm, earthquake, or tsunami.

Shanks told the young man, “A long time ago, there were the Seven Warlords and such who tried to topple Whitebeard…but I thought all

those fools were gone now. Why Whitebeard?”

“Well, who else was Roger’s rival but Whitebeard? Plus, Whitebeard’s flag flew over Fish-Man Island. As I came into the New World, he was the first one to stand in my way.”

“Wait, you mean…” “I put my own flag over Fish-Man Island,” Ace said, a fire now glowing in his palm.

“You burned it?”

“I suppose so.” Shanks was silent, but the smile never left his face. “Well, I suppose it’s not my business to interfere with that.”

It was a four-way standoff. Each of the Four Emperors had such great power that it was nearly impossible for any of them to destroy the others. If any of them actually won such a war, the victory would come at a very high price and leave them vulnerable to the remaining Emperors.

The world was a big place. But it wasn’t quite big enough to contain the endless greed, power, and rivalry of mankind.

“I’m relieved to hear that. So if I take out Whitebeard, you won’t consider it an act of aggression against you,” Ace said boldly. It was a bit of a test.

Whitebeard was the most senior of the Four Emperors, so based on Aces’s way of saying it, Shanks could have

taken this as an insult against himself.

Was it right for me to have been born?

That was the question Ace asked himself, from the first moment he could think independently.

He was born the son of Roger, King of the Pirates. From the time of his birth, his father was considered the worst criminal in recorded history. His mother had died,

he was left with bandits, and he lived like a scavenger, picking through heaps of trash.

He would never tell anyone about that in order to win their sympathy. That was why Ace did not reveal that he was Roger’s son, and did not ask the Pirate King’s former subordinate Shanks for protection based on that connection.

What reasons did he have to keep living? The only ones

Ace ever opened his heart to, to justify his survival, were his foster brothers back on Mt. Corvo before he went out to sea, the boys he shared ritual cups with—Luffy and Sabo.

Sabo went to sea a bit earlier than Ace did. Unfortunately, he perished, the victim of a cruel and unfair world. His boat was sunk for the so-called crime of passing in front of a Celestial Dragon’s ship.

The Celestial Dragons were the world's nobles, the most privileged class of society. They lived in the sacred capital city of Marijoa, where they looked down upon the lower classes and owned many slaves. Even the higher-up heads of the military and government, and some monarchs, essentially lived under the brutal thumb of the Celestial Dragons.

What did Ace think when he lost Sabo? He had many

thoughts about this, but he kept them confined to the moment they occurred to him, and did not go back to dwell on them.

The enemy that killed Sabo is the opposite of freedom. It was the world that killed Sabo. You can't really live or die unless you're executed and change history with your death, like Roger did.

So Ace chose to be a pirate.

Whether or not the world accepts me or hates me, I'll

be a great pirate. I'll show them all.

That was the genesis of Ace's desire to be a pirate.

He'd never met his father and felt nothing but hatred toward him. Ace grew up tormented about being the son of a terrible criminal, and in the end, the only way for him to move forward and live freely was to go beyond what his father did.

He wouldn't be "Ace, son of Roger." From that moment, it

would be “Roger, father of Ace.” That was what he needed to turn the tables. And it wouldn’t happen if he just did the same things Roger did. It couldn’t just be about the One Piece and being King of the Pirates.

It could be anything. Anything to become famous and make Gold Roger a name of the past. Here in the New World, it would all be about Portgaz D. Ace. He was going to make sure everyone knew

the name given to him by his mother, Rouge, who hid from the government and secretly gave birth to him after twenty months of gestation.

Through talking with Shanks, Ace felt these vague ideas that had been floating in his heart coalescing, and turning into a solid conviction.

Without revealing what was on his mind, Ace told Shanks, “The entire world is my enemy. Warlords, Emperors, even Celestial Dragons…I’ll

topple them all. I'll bring low everything that now sits high and mighty. And I'll do it with this flame…with my name and my flag."

To surpass the Pirate King, Gol D. Roger, the starting point for Portgaz D. Ace will be to defeat Edward "Whitebeard" Newgate.

Shanks held his silence, listening to him speak. He was going to let the kid get it all out of his system.

What was reflected in Red-Hair’s eyes?

Vague, undirected dissatisfaction and frustration toward the world. An impatient, youthful tendency toward danger. These things were true of just about any rookie pirate making their name in the world.

But what was that dark ember glowing beneath his violent, attention-seeking flames?

“But that’s enough about me. I want to hear about you now.”

“Me?”

Now it was Ace who wanted to hear from Shanks.

“Yeah. For instance, about your flag. You’ve got the three scars on the skull. They stand for those, don’t they?” Ace said, glancing at Shanks’s left eye. There were three long scars running from his forehead, over his eye and down his cheek.

“These?”

“Luffy’s got a scar on his left cheek, but apparently he did that himself, like a little idiot, thinking it would earn him a spot on your pirate crew. But yours—yours clearly came from battle. Who did it? Who could put a wound like that on you?”

Indeed, who was capable of scarring Red-Haired Shanks, one of the four most powerful pirates in the world?

Shanks traced the scars with three fingers. “These…”

“I can’t imagine who’d be terrifying enough to land a blow like that on you.”

Stories about Red-Haired Shanks in battle often involved his duels with Mihawk, the world’s greatest swordsman. But this was not a typical sword wound. The three lines were parallel, as though he’d been clawed.

“It happened in the East Blue, before I lost my arm.”

“Boss?” piped up one of his men, uncertainly. It seemed it was uncommon for Shanks to talk about the scar.

“It was the Whitebeard Pirates who put this scar on me.”

“It was Whitebeard?!”

“No. It was just a pirate under his employ.” So it was just a man, not even one of his division leaders…

“You’re not saying this just to scare me off from going after…”

“I don’t care if you think I’m lying,” Shanks said, this being one of the rare times that he would test Ace with his words.

If you want to take out Whitebeard, you’ll have to beat not just him, but everyone in his entire family.

“What’s he doing now?”

“Dunno. I haven’t felt this wound itch in a while…”

A log in the fire popped and crumbled. The party’s conviviality had passed, and the evening’s drink had run

dry. Shanks gave a nod, and his followers began to clear the path to the cave's exit.

The night was over.

Ace had made his antagonism toward the Whitebeard Pirates clear. Since they'd shared a customary rite of welcome, Shanks wasn't going to harm the other pirate, but as one of the competing Four Emperors, Shanks couldn't extend any special treatment to the Spade

Pirates beyond what he'd already done.

After, he would send a message to Whitebeard. He would write: *The pirate Portgaz D. Ace who is on his way to challenge you has no special connection to the Red-Haired Pirates*.

That, too, was one of the customary ways.

A clash between Emperors was an event that would shake the New World to its core. The buds of conflict had

to be nipped off before they could grow.

For Ace's part, he'd received the courtesy of a night and a meal in the Red-Haired Pirates' territory, so it was common courtesy to return the favor by leaving without making any trouble. But this meant that venturing next into Whitebeard's stretch of sea could lead to a rain of blood…

The *Piece of Spadille* departed the winter island.

"From the moment he approached the shore, I could sense his Haki. It was like flame itself."

"No wonder he could melt a winter island's snow. Woulda been a blizzard if not for him," said Benn Beckman, pulling up the collar of his coat.

"What did you see in him?" Shanks asked, seeking the wisdom of his first mate.

"Say he beats Whitebeard. What does he do after that? Based on the story he was

telling, I can’t envision it,” said Benn Beckman.

The entire world was his enemy. He would destroy the world order that kept the Celestial Dragons on top. And that meant destroying the Four Emperors, too. That was all part of Ace’s grand vision.

“Didn’t seem very pirate-like.”

“He was awful courteous at first, but then he starts going on and on about himself. The kid’s more naive than he

looks. Like he’s not really a pirate, but a gladiator. If he wants to destroy the world that bad, why didn’t he join the Revolutionaries?”

No interest in the King of the Pirates or adventure. No intention to hunt pirates as one of the Seven Warlords. No desire to be a Naval hero, protecting the common people. If anything, the most appropriate place for him seemed to be with the Revolutionary Army, that

group of so-called terrorists seeking to overthrow the World Government.

"He's limiting his choices, all by himself. The way he's acting, the best he'll ever be is the captain of a single ship."

Benn Beckman didn't see any potential beyond that in the young man named Ace.

If he had logs, he could start a fire. But a fire wouldn't keep burning with just that. If he started a fire somewhere, set a mountain ablaze and

burned down everything in sight, the fire would eventually burn itself out. What was Ace going to do beyond that?

"He said he was from the South Blue."

Baterilla… Shanks ruminated on the name of that island.

"You curious about him?"

Shanks sat in silence.

"He's a rookie who turned down the Seven Warlords, so I expected a lot, but he seemed

like your average kid with an inflated opinion of himself. He ate a Logia fruit, and now he thinks he’s invincible,” said Benn Beckman with a sigh.

“But that rookie got recommended for the Seven Warlords.” That meant that the World Government—Sengoku and the Five Elders—saw something in Ace.

“That’s what bothers me. Does that make him Warlord material or not? With a Logia

fruit alone, you'd only max out in the hundred-million range. And the bounty currently sitting on Portgaz D. Ace's head is…"

Ace's bounty had soared in value after he spurned the Five Elders' offer to join that elite cadre of privateers. It indicated that he was dangerous, but this was simply too much. There must be some other circumstance. Was that why the World Government was trying to lock

Ace down into just the Warlord title?

" 'He'd already been executed when I was born.' "

"What?"

"For playing like he didn't care, he sure thought a lot about Captain Roger… He even called him Gol D. Roger at the end."

That was a rare thing from a young person nowadays. A faint smile played over Shanks's lips.

This was different from the silent grin he always wore. Benn Beckman felt like it had been ages since he saw his captain smile with actual emotion like this.

Chapter Three

—1—

Whitebeard… That's the only man who could stand toe-to-toe with Roger, King of

the Pirates. He's a legendary monster!

He's the most powerful man in the world, without a doubt!

The man closest to the One Piece!

The bits of information that Skull gathered about Edward "Whitebeard" Newgate came from many sources, but all said the same thing.

Whatever you do, don't mess with Whitebeard.

"The strongest in the world," Ace murmured.

It was hard to say *what* made you the strongest. This wasn't some kids' competition, like footraces or arm wrestling or test grades.

According to Skull, the pirate-obsessed nerd, in terms of sheer battle power in a one-on-one fight, Kaido was likely the strongest. If you were sitting around drinking, telling stories and debating the merits, you might conclude that Kaido was the invincible "strongest creature

alive," while Big Mom had the "strongest family in the world," and Edward Newgate's very life was that of the "strongest pirate alive."

"Whitebeard's terrifying if you break the code. In the pirating world, that means the bond of ceremonial cups. Whitebeard would never rest if his progeny—those followers with whom he's shared cups—were killed. Never," Skull warned Ace emphatically.

“Well, yeah. Who wouldn’t be upset if his pals got hurt? Same goes for the other Emperors—and for me, of course.”

“That’s true,” admitted Deuce, “but there are levels to this sort of thing. When those in your group are harmed, do you feel anger for their sake, or anger that your own honor was attacked, or do you make a show of anger to strengthen the connections within your family?”

“Which do you think is true in Whitebeard’s case, Deuce?”

“Based on what Skull’s saying, Kaido’s the dangerous combative type, and Big Mom’s more business-oriented… Red-Hair was difficult to pin down, based on what I saw of him, but I bet Whitebeard’s more like your classic pirate type.”

“The pirate crews under his operation are expanding big-time. If there’s an unaffiliated pirate who

wanders into his territory, he sends one of his division leaders to them. If they obey, great. If they don't, there's a simple answer for that," Skull said, clenching an iron fist to demonstrate.

The New World was split between the Four Emperors, but there were pirates, including prominent young rookies like Ace, who weren't happy with that arrangement. Ultimately, they would have to make a choice: either join one

of the Emperors for protection, be destroyed, or carve out their own little slice of territory. That's how things worked on this sea.

"So let's get down to business here. There's been a bit of chaos lately in Whitebeard's territory," Skull explained, opening up a map and putting chess pieces on top of it. The white king was Whitebeard, with the other white pieces, representing his

division leaders, arranged around him.

"Bohemian Knight Doma, the A.O. Pirates, and a couple more pirate crews are trying to barge in on Whitebeard's territory. They're not aligned with one another, but they've all started fighting back at the same time. If you dig into the backstory, it seems like there's some sabotage afoot from the other Emperors. At any rate, Whitebeard's division leaders are marshaling their forces

and heading out to neutralize these threats.”

Black chess pieces headed into Whitebeard’s space. Behind them was the black king. Then the white pieces pushed forward in the direction of black.

“And that means the white king has few defenses now.”

“Four ships in Whitebeard’s main fleet are out on assignment. The *Moby Dick*, his mothership, might as well be defenseless.”

“This sounds like the perfect opportunity to take a shot at the world’s strongest man,” said Ace, reaching for the white king.

Down in the water, directly below the Piece of Spadille, swam a humanoid figure. It was trailing Ace’s ship—and had been doing so ever since the ship entered the New World, in fact.

The fish-man kicked above the surface and then sank

deep beneath the waves, leaving the ship's side in search of some distant destination.

—2—

The island was wreathed in a thin mist.

The Spade Pirates moored their ship on a chilly coast spotted with conifer trees, and disembarked. Nearby animals bolted for safety, alarmed by

the arrival of the unexpected visitors.

"Nobody's here," said one of the crew.

"Stay on guard… We're in Whitebeard's territory now," warned Deuce.

It appeared to be a completely ordinary island. But this was one of the places Whitebeard used to resupply.

Resupplying is something any seafaring pirate must do to survive; it's a lifeline. Especially when you command

a crew of a thousand. Seawater can be purified until it’s drinkable, and fish and aquatic mammals can be acquired for food—but there are many supplies, like firewood, that can only be found on land.

So in a sense, the entire island was a working farm producing supplies for the Whitebeard Pirates. Somewhere on this rock were fields where farmers worked in Whitebeard’s employ,

producing vegetables, fruit, and meat for the crew.

Ace received word that Whitebeard's main ship might be stopping by to resupply in the near future, so he took the crew through the mist to secretly disembark on the far side of the island.

"Is Whitebeard really coming here?"

"Don't chicken out, Deuce. If we get tired of waiting, we can just run our flag up on this island instead."

A resupply point was the ideal place to carve away some territory. If Whitebeard was flustered by that, it would be reward enough.

"What about the *Piece of Spadille*?"

"Mihal's in charge. We'll hide it in some secluded inlet or another, and set up a campsite. Who knows how many days we'll be waiting here."

They had to be careful that the farmers on the island

didn’t spot them. The mist would not last forever.

“I’m gonna take a few men and check out the area.”

“Be careful, Ace. Whitebeard might have left some soldiers here.”

“It’s fine. We’re prepping for war anyway.”

“Oh, c’mon.”

He was like a knife that was all edge. Ace was always a loose cannon—the type to act before he thought—but he had been more hasty and less

careful than ever since they'd reached the New World, Deuce noticed. Why was that?

If there had been a starting point, it was when he'd messed with Whitebeard's flag at Fish-Man Island. There had to be a reason for that. Deuce thought he—and he alone—knew the answer. As the son of Roger, the King of the Pirates, Ace felt invisibly persecuted by the rest of the world. He was struggling,

trying to free himself from the chains of his father’s shadow.

He had no interest in the One Piece, or being King of the Pirates. When Ace told Shanks as much, it was probably the unvarnished truth. Ace wanted to be free of Gold Roger’s curse. If he was going to succeed at that, he couldn’t be King and find the One Piece… He couldn’t just do what his father did.

So what should he accomplish?

How could he surpass his father? Roger was the first man to conquer the Grand Line, shaking the foundations of the world and bringing about a new era. But in the end he died a miserable death, executed at Roguetown. He submitted to the yoke of the World Government.

To overturn the world.

Perhaps in some vague way, Ace’s goal was a kind of conquest. To be a man ruled

by no one and nothing. Not the Navy, not the Four Emperors, not the World Government—not even the Celestial Dragons, those living gods who called upon the Navy's admirals like bodyguards. To destroy the very concept of a protected class like the Celestial Dragons.

All of existence was his foe.

So Whitebeard, the man praised for being neck-and-neck with the King

of the Pirates, was the first step on the stairs he sought to climb.

What Deuce was doing—asking Skull to investigate, collecting information, and waiting for the right opportunity to launch a surprise strike on Whitebeard's forces—was executing a solid military strategy, but it was not where Ace's interests were. Ace would challenge them directly, even if it meant facing the

entire combined might of Whitebeard's group.

Ace took a few men and began to walk along the coastline. Deuce gave orders to the others and began to search for a discreet place to push farther into the forest.

Boom…!

There was a roar like a cannonball blast.

Where was that? Deuce wondered, holding his breath. Up ahead through the light mist was the inlet where the

Piece of Spadille was supposed to have gone…

A huge shadow appeared before the Spade Pirates. The entire group was stunned. Where had it come from? It came leaping out from the bottom of the sea, in fact. A sodden cloth was draped over the figure's shoulder.

"Isn't that our…"

Deuce couldn't even finish his question. It was the flag of the Spade Pirates, the one that flew from their mainmast.

This creature had torn it off, mast and all, and tossed it aside like scrap cloth.

The Spade Pirates bristled. Tearing down a pirates' flag was equivalent to stomping on their faces with your boot. The only possible response was battle.

Deuce was worried about the ship. Was Mihal, the ship's guard, all right?

"Do you…do you realize what you've done?" Ace

growled. He stared down the enemy through the mist.

"I could ask the same of you! Do you understand what you did when you burned down Whitebeard's flag over Fish-Man Island?" said a deep, threatening voice.

"Oh!" gulped Wallace, the fish-man of the crew.

"Ah, you have a fish-man, too? Do you know who I am, young man?" growled the figure, glaring down from a height of ten feet.

“Boss!” gasped Wallace, who was so terrified he could say nothing more.

“Are you the boy who turned down the Seven Warlords, then?”

“I don’t know nothin’ about the Warlords, you big lug,” said Ace, fire enveloping his body. Very quickly, the mist in the area burned away, revealing torn earth.

“King Neptune of the Ryugu Kingdom and Whitebeard are good friends. That flag

protected Fish-Man Island from pirates, boy. Your actions are too serious to laugh off as a childish prank."

It meant making an enemy of all fish-men—and doing great insult to the reputation of Whitebeard, Emperor of the Sea.

"Listen, big guy…I wanna see this Whitebeard dude!"

"And then what?"

"You already know." Ace indicated the threat he posed with the flame in his hands.

The rookie who'd spurned the Seven Warlords and made contact with Red-Hair Shanks intended to take out Whitebeard.

"Well, I can't allow Pops to meet with a boy as sharp and willing to harm as a knife! I am not part of the Whitebeard Pirates…but I do have an obligation to oppose you."

"That's one of the Warlords, Ace! It's Jimbei!" his companions warned.

Of course he was aware this was the First Son of the Sea—a man counted among the Seven Warlords, who was previously wanted for a bounty of 250 million berries.

Jimbei, the second captain in the history of the Sun Pirates, had long served as a diplomatic bridge navigating the rocky relationship between humans and fish-men. Eventually, he was given an invitation by the World

Government to join the Warlords.

The Warlords made up one of the Three Great Powers. They were government-sanctioned privateers, pirates who hunted other pirates. In exchange for a percentage of their earnings, they were granted the right to pillage from pirates and unaffiliated countries without being charged by the government.

So Jimbei the Warlord attacking the Spade Pirates was an act sanctioned by law. He could say that he was an assassin sent by the World Government to eliminate Ace for refusing their offer, and it would all check out. But Jimbei stood at this moment as an individual, a fish-man, for his own personal reasons.

Ace had been under observation on Fish-Man Island ever since his encounter with Aladdin. Jimbei

had made sure his people knew to keep an eye on him.

He'd started off as just a dangerous rookie, but Portgaz D. Ace had made clear his intention was to take Whitebeard's territory. So they had trailed his ship all the way from Fish-Man Island to this point. Fish-men could swim, after all.

The ensuing battle lasted four whole days and continued into the morning of a fifth.

It was a battle to the death—a conflict of life against life, one grinding the other down until each side was nearly snuffed out.

Jimbei was a master of fish-man karate. The secret of that martial art of the Ryugu Kingdom lay in having control over water. Its blows were not simply bludgeoning impacts, but rather sent their force in waves through the moisture in living bodies, trees, the

ground, and even the atmosphere.

Ace, on the other hand, wielded the power of the Flame-Flame Fruit. He could transform his own body into fire. It was a Logia power, a seemingly invincible force of nature, but that did not mean there was no way to counteract it.

In a fight with one worthy of being in the Seven Warlords, such weaknesses would eventually show—and

now, after so much battle, Ace's breath and flame were both feeble enough that they were close to being snuffed out. He had collapsed on the ground.

"*Huff, huff*…"

"*Huff, huff*…"

The same was true of Jimbei. His clothes were burned and the expanse of his ten-foot bulk was exhausted to the point of inertia, like a fish beached on land.

It’s been five days, and still neither of them has the upper hand! At this rate they’re both going to die!

The Spade Pirates had no option but to keep their distance and observe a battle that was far beyond their capacities. It was a valuable glimpse at just how powerful their captain was.

They’d seen the true measure of his fighting ability in vivid detail. But the counterpoint to their

amazement at the skills he had demonstrated was their dread at the sheer strength, stamina, and willpower of the First Son of the Sea, who could battle so dauntlessly against Ace without the aid of a Devil Fruit power.

Are there more like this in the New World? Those with even greater power than this, in fact?

"I'm…I'm gonna go stop him."

"What, Master Deu?"

They’d been hanging back and watching the battle for days, but the tension of that alone had left the crew exhausted. Deuce marched up to Ace and Jimbei, who had both collapsed in a stalemate. The ground beneath them was scorched and riddled with holes.

“Ace. You alive?” asked Deuce, glancing briefly at Jimbei just in case. “I don’t know if you can hear me, but

I’ll say it anyway. I’m going to help you now.”

“Eh!”

Apparently, Ace was just barely conscious. He couldn’t move. Ace had Logia powers—had he ever suffered so much damage to his physical body before?

A Warlord and a man who refused to be a Warlord.

It seemed their battle was a peculiar clash of characteristics in which each participant’s strengths

negated the other's. If it were an exhibition of fighting arts, this would be considered a weak match, indeed. And both men were incredibly tough. As a fish-man, this could be expected of Jimbei, but Ace proved himself to be nearly superhuman in stamina as well.

"I'm going to pick you up, and we're going to get out of here."

"Deuce…" Ace muttered in protest. But he didn't have

enough strength left to brush his crewmate away.

"If you've got complaints, I'll hear them later. I can't have you dying on me now. For the sake of your honor, I'm just going to be honest: you picked the wrong opponent," Deuce said, lifting Ace up to lean on his shoulder.

"Let…go! I still haven't finished fighting…the big guy…" rasped Ace. But when he lifted his head, he and the rest of the Spade Pirates saw

the last thing they were expecting.

Yet they should have expected it. It was the man they were waiting for. The very man they had come here to ambush.

“Ah!” Deuce gasped.

Beyond the pale mist of the morning was a vast shadow, as big and round as an Island Whale. But this whale did not bellow a whale call. This whale had a mast sticking out of its back—and it sidled up to the

coast like a ship. An enormous ship.

"Who is it that's come to take my head? Then have at it! I'll take you all on!"

Standing at the prow of the ship like a hunter over his white whale was the king of the New World.

"That's the Whitebeard Pirate Crew."

"I can handle this myself."

Thud! The man struck the edge of the ship with the blunt

end of his weapon—a long, spear-shaped blade called a naginata. A shock wave crackled through the air.

The naginata had to be twenty feet long. It looked like a ship’s mast in his hand.

And the stature of the man called Edward Newgate, Whitebeard himself, was nearly as towering.

He had the look of a ruler of the seas.

The Spade Pirates were overwhelmed. They were

paralyzed with fear—some felt their spirit broken, and fell to their knees.

There was a gust of wind, and a shock wave like a slash through the air cut by a master swordsman tore through the Spade Pirates.

Screams.

The sound of his companions' voices brought clarity back to Ace's hazy consciousness. He pushed Deuce away and stood on his own. The masked man

stumbled backward to where the rest of the crew waited.

"Step down here! I've come to take you out!" Ace howled, his body battered and bloodied. He barked like a stray dog, calling all attention to himself.

Whitebeard unleashed another swing. This flying slash grazed Ace and plunged through the crewmates behind him.

"Eeyaaaaah!"

“Guys! That’s it…the Flame Fence!”

Fwoom! A wall of fire many feet tall rose up just behind Ace.

The sudden roar of flame whipped up the air, blocking the brunt of Whitebeard’s gusts from passing through.

“Captain!”

“Captain Ace, what are you doing?!” shouted his men from beyond the flames. With the Flame Fence blocking their

way, they couldn’t rush forward to help Ace, either.

“Run! All of you!” Ace shouted.

Whitebeard watched in silence. Eventually he mocked them: “What, chickening out now?” First the youngster talked trash, then he started beating a retreat? The great pirate was a bit disappointed.

“Let my men go!” said Ace, staring Whitebeard down. “In exchange…I’ll stay here until the end!”

Ace was the captain. This battle was something that Ace sought for himself.
At this, for the first time, the legendary demon that was Whitebeard, Edward Newgate, revealed his human side. He chuckled, “You little sprat. You think you’re man enough to take me?”

“*Graaaaah!!*”

Shwuk!

If it hadn't been for Sabo, and a handful of a little brother like you,

I wouldn't have bothered staying alive.

Can you imagine? For Portgaz D. Ace, just being born and living life ground him down to his core.

If Gold Roger had a kid, you'd execute the spawn too. Nobody would want such a

child around. It's just a sad fact of life.

What if we let every last person in the world with a grudge against Roger poke him with a needle? Then set him on fire, and let the entire world laugh at him before he dies!

And they'll all say, serves you right! Gya ha ha ha!

Gold Roger brought about the Great Age of Piracy from the execution stand in Roguetown by hinting about

the One Piece, a treasure supposedly containing everything in the world.

But this turbulent era was by no means a boon for everyone. The way the Ryugu Kingdom suffered at the hands of mermaid-hunters was only one example of this; lawless pirates took to pillaging and destroying in all corners of the globe.

While history ascribed many dazzling tales of heroism and grand adventure to the Age of

Piracy, for the nameless common people of the time, the arrival of pirates was like a storm or drought—a merciless disaster that stole away loved ones.

"*I hope his last words were 'I'm sorry for being born, and for being the trash that I am,'* " someone might say, hurling this invective like so much drivel into a spittoon. But the circumstances of that random man's life and what Roger actually did in his were not

likely to have any connection. Lowlifes who spend their days smoldering in bars and gambling dens over watered-down booze are always apt to blame their problems on others.

"*The man executed by the World Government for being the worst, most despicable criminal in history should become the dirt beneath humanity's feet*."

But he was just a pirate. Did he deserve such derision

because he conquered the Grand Line and reached the final island of Laugh Tale? When a man’s already dead, you can say whatever you want about him.

Did the World Government so thoroughly smear Roger’s personal history because he knew the answer to the riddle of the One Piece? Because he stirred up the public and tempted young people into the idea of being pirates? Nobody could say for sure.

But in any case, the innocent public was given license to insult his memory, to blame him for everything and claim his death was payment for his sins. If anyone carried on his bloodline, they would also deserve to be stamped out. His wife, his children—all were fair game if you had a rock in your hand. All the world shared this common understanding. In fact, such an act would be considered

worthy of praise. And this was entirely at the World Government's direction. One might suppose that Roger's existence, and what he achieved, were extremely dangerous ideas to the world nobles, the Celestial Dragons…

The people did not know. They mocked his life without even knowing his real name.

Gol D. Roger? Who's that? Do you mean Gold Roger?

Do I know about him? Don't you know whose fault it is that

there are so many pirates in the world?

It's all that Gold Roger guy's fault.

He's someone who should never have been born. He's a complete and total scumbag.

A headache in life, and a headache in death. The worst trash in history. That's all you need to know.

Back on Mt. Corvo in the East Blue, Ace was a brat with such an ornery mean streak that even the mountain

bandits had trouble controlling him. Every time he wandered into town, bloodshed resulted.

What were you doing in town, Ace?! The street thugs down there were raising all kinds of hell, saying a young boy nearly murdered them.

Shut up! If I had the power, I would have killed them all!

He stared holes into anyone and anything that crossed his path.

Nobody knew about Ace’s parentage. But to him it felt

like every single person he encountered blamed him just for being alive. They wanted all of Roger’s blood relatives dead.

Growing up in squalor, living off of the scraps of the mountain bandits. It was better when he was starving for food and affection. When he was old enough to think for himself, and his mind dwelt not just on life, but on death as well, Ace’s hatred festered,

and not a day went by that he didn’t think of his father.

He knew that if anyone found out his father was Roger, even the closest friend would leave him. So the solution was simple: he never tried to make friends in the first place.

Bwa ha ha ha ha! I hear you’re a real handful these days, Ace!

It was Garp, the Naval officer who had left Ace with the bandits. He was a vice

admiral with Navy HQ who had battled Roger in the past, such that they came to know one another in a way. One day, Roger surrendered himself to the Navy. Once he was arrested and his execution was scheduled, Roger took Garp aside and told him a secret: that he had an unborn child.

A search went out for any blood relations of the King of the Pirates. Garp warned him at once: they'll execute your

woman, and the baby if it’s been born.

But for better or for worse, Roger could see the true nature of people. And in the end, after Roger’s execution at Roguetown, Garp secretly protected the woman who gave birth in the town of Baterilla in the South Blue, after a stunning twenty months of pregnancy. The length of human gestation is typically no more than ten months. Therefore, based on

the timing of Roger's arrest, it could not possibly have been Roger's child. No one would make the connection.

As the mother wished, Garp named the boy Ace and left the baby with Dadan, a mountain bandit he knew on the fringes of East Blue.

Every now and then, he came back to see the boy. Only Garp, Dadan, and Ace himself knew that he was the son of the dreaded King of the Pirates.

You have a grandson, don't you, old man? Is he…happy?

You mean Luffy? He's all right.

At the time, Ace couldn't have guessed that he would soon end up living with that vice admiral's grandson in the bandits' shack in the mountains.

Old man.

What?

Would it…have been better if I was never born?

The more seriously he thought about that question, the harder it was to find the answer. Garp considered it for a while, then gave his response.

Well, kid…only time can answer that question.

Chapter Four

—1—

The only sound was waves.

His mouth was bone-dry. It felt like there were cracks on the inside of his throat. He coughed and spat something that tasted like all of his fluids mixed together—blood, saliva, and stomach acid—and bounded to his feet.

"*Agh*! *Koff*!"

He hacked, again and again.

Gradually, clarity returned to his mind. His body felt sluggish, reminding him of being bedridden with fever as

a child. Everything hurt: muscles, joints, limbs…

"Here."

"Huh?!"

He smelled fresh water. It brought his attention to his unbearable thirst. The salt breeze had ruined the lining of his nostrils. He snatched the cup before his face and downed the water in one go.

Then he glanced again at the person who had handed him the cup. Apparently he'd

been sleeping on the deck for quite a while.

The man was sitting on the gunwale of the ship, peering down at Ace as though looking at a stray kitten. Ace sat on the deck, leaning back against the side wall.

Where was he? It wasn't the Piece of Spadille. This ship was much, much bigger.

"Who are you?" Ace hurled the cup aside.

"Don't throw the dishes."

"Shut up…*ugh*!"

Ace tried to get up, but his body wouldn't obey. *What happened? Why am I on this unfamiliar ship?* He was confused.

The man sitting on the edge of the ship smiled at him. He was wearing white… A cook? No, not with that scar and the dangerous look in his eyes. You'd wonder what a cook like *that* was slicing up with his butcher knife.

"You still asleep?"

"Where am I?"

“You’re on our ship. The Moby Dick.”

That was the ship of Whitebeard. Edward Newgate. In other words, Ace was… Yes, that’s right.

That’s what happened…

“I’m Thatch, leader of the fourth division. If you’re gonna be sailing with us, let’s try to get along.”

“Shut up!”

“Ha ha ha! I see you’re not a morning person. Say…would you like to know what

happened after you passed out?”

After using his Flame Fence technique to erect a barricade that allowed his friends to escape, Ace faced off against Edward “Whitebeard” Newgate.

It was immediately following his five-day fight against Jimbei, First Son of the Sea. Ace’s body was ravaged, completely spent

from his earlier fight. It was a wonder he could stand.

Perhaps that wall of fire was no obstacle to Whitebeard, however. In any case, he saw the way Ace used himself as a shield to protect his companions, and found it laudable. There’s no way to know Whitebeard’s mind, but the fact remained that he waited until the Spade Pirates had retreated.

And then—one swing of his naginata, Haki and all,

brought Ace to his knees. It wasn't even a fight. The Logia power of flame itself was scattered to the wind by Whitebeard's blow.

"*Agh*!"

And yet Ace stood up again. The Flame Fence regained strength.

I'm not going to run.

He would make sure Deuce and the gang got away. He would use every last ounce of strength to protect his beloved Spade Pirates.

He had pride and dignity at stake, too. His enemy, Whitebeard, had clearly allowed his crew to get away. Ace couldn’t just use those lives as bargaining chips and attempt to flee with his fire. If he did, and actually got away alive, he would have a coward’s reputation around his neck. And thus his fame would never outshine that of Roger the Pirate King.

"*Gura ra ra ra*… You still have the strength to stand?" Whitebeard chuckled.

If Ace attempted to run now, the Whitebeard Pirates would give chase. His crew would be pursued. So Ace did not flee. He had to take the head of Edward Newgate, here and now.

"*Agh*…"

"It'd be a waste to kill you, boy."

A waste? Ace couldn't understand what he meant by

that. But he knew what he felt at that moment.

Anger.

It was very clear that the man was looking down on him.

“Eh?!”

“If you still want to terrorize the seas, do it in my name!” said Whitebeard, holding a hand out to the defeated Ace.

“Become my son!”

The blood rushed to his head.

He hated everything about this. The last thing Ace wanted was for this man to treat him like a child.

"Eh?! No way!"

Ace challenged Whitebeard and was utterly flattened. It was a total loss.

He didn't even remember how he lost. It was like an overwhelming strength had split his skull. Perhaps that's what it felt like to have your

old man crack you on the head.

At any rate, Ace finally understood the obvious.

He had lost.

He'd been taken prisoner, hauled aboard Whitebeard's ship, and laid out on the deck. For at least a night, if not longer. That island was nowhere in sight now.

"Your men came back for you afterward," said Thatch, the fourth division leader, "so we clobbered 'em."

"Ah!"

Ace gasped. It couldn't be. They'd escaped with their lives and gotten away from the dreaded Whitebeard—and they'd wasted that chance and come *back*?

"But don't worry, they're alive. And they're all aboard this ship," said Thatch soothingly, when he saw the look of fury on Ace's features.

They're alive? Is that…even possible?

The Spade Pirates were destroyed. They'd met the Whitebeard Pirates head-on and were crushed… That's what happens. When pirates battle pirates with pistols and swords, there's no rules or honor, just war. All the loser leaves behind is a dead body.

Ace felt further deflated with each moment that passed. To Whitebeard, this didn't even qualify as war. He didn't engage in war with rookies. There was no

comparison between their crews.

Ace looked down at his arms. His hands weren't even bound by iron cuffs, much less the Sea Prism Stone that could contain Devil Fruit powers. If he wanted, he could certainly use his power to burn down the entire ship.

"You sure you want to let me walk around without chains on?"

"Huh?" said Thatch, in his lighthearted way. "He didn't

order us to lock you in a cell. Why, did you want to be?”

—2—

Night.

A sneaking shadow crept across the deck of the *Moby Dick*.

It slipped past watchful eyes, an easy feat for a man who’d engaged in thieving and burglary since he was a child. He plotted his course. He knew which cabin the ship’s

captain used. The target was the man known as the king of the seas. He was no weakhearted coward, locking his door against intruders—but Ace was not stupid enough to announce his presence with a knock, either.

Or maybe he was just so desperate that being that foolish was never an option.

"*Shnorrr*…"

A tremendous snoring was audible through the wall. This was it.

Fwoom.

He let his body turn to fire.

If there was a weakness to his powers now, it was that he couldn’t use them and hide in the dark. Neither could he stop himself from exuding heat. He would have one moment—a single chance to end it all.

Ace turned to flame and launched his blade at the strongest pirate in the world, who was sleeping in his bed.

Blink… *Crash*!

“Whoa!”

“What are you doing? Keep it down, people are trying to sleep!” Whitebeard said, and swatted away the ball of flame as though dealing with a fly in the room. And just as quickly, he was snoring again.

“*Shnorrr*…”

It was like a bad joke. While in his flaming form, Ace was knocked out by a slap and sent tumbling back out of the cabin and into the hallway.

In fact, his nose was bleeding now. So much for sneak attacks.

—3—

Portgaz D. Ace was still on the Moby Dick.

He was a loser, a prisoner. He wore no cuffs or shackles. But this was open sea; as a Devil Fruit user, Ace couldn’t float on his own. There could be no escape without at least stealing a rowboat.

And Ace had no intention of escaping.

At first he was just exhausted—he'd been fighting Jimbei for several days. In the weeks following, after he had recovered, Ace "paid his respects" to Whitebeard nearly every day.

Sometimes he tried attacking him in his sleep. Other times, he swung an axe from behind.

Whack! Splash…

Each and every time, Whitebeard swatted him away like a fly.

“Hey! He fell in the sea!”

“Somebody better go save him!”

Ace’s constant failed attempts to attack Whitebeard became a bit of a running joke among the pirate crew. At this point, every last person there knew his name.

He was trying to kill their captain. It would be perfectly acceptable for them to tie him

up and toss him into the sea. But ultimately, they seemed to share an unshakable trust that no matter what, no one could do any harm to their captain.

"*Ugh*… Captain Ace!" shouted Wallace the fish-man, who jumped overboard and easily rescued Ace. The members of Whitebeard's crew began to chuckle and murmur, both relieved and annoyed.

"I'm surprised he's not getting bored of this,"

muttered Thatch, emerging from a cabin.

Even before he fell into the water and began to drown, the impact of Whitebeard's strike had knocked Ace unconscious.

"Every single day… Doesn't he ever quit?" muttered Vista, the Fifth Division leader, known by the epithet of "Flower Sword."

"*Ah!* Haaaa…"
Ace bolted upright from his sleep and began to cough. He was on an examination bed in the doctor's cabin.
"So you're back."
"Eh!"
Across from Ace, dressed in a white doctor's coat, was none other than Masked Deuce.
"You never learn. How many dozens of times have you tried by now?"
"Listen, I—" Ace began to retort.

“Oh, Doctor!”
The nurses had arrived. These were the real angels of the battlefield. They wore knockout uniforms of miniskirts and high leopard-print boots. They even smelled nice.
The main fleet of the Whitebeard Pirates alone had several huge ships and well over a thousand members, making its crew the size of a modest town. They had multiple ship’s doctors with

enough medical support to be considered a hospital.
“I told you not to call me that. I didn’t even graduate from medical school.”
“Oh, the other doctors probably aren’t real doctors, either,” said one of the nurses, draping herself over Deuce. The combination of masked man and leopard-booted woman was a very strange one.

Deuce was a failed medical student. There was no ship’s

doctor in the Spade Pirates, but they didn’t really need one, because Deuce filled the role well enough.

Besides, what pirate crew demanded a diploma to accept a doctor on board? Just sew up the parts that get cut, amputate the parts that won’t survive, and isolate the people with contagious illness. With a crew as large as Whitebeard’s, a degradation in sanitary conditions could have frightening consequences. A

closed-off, isolated space like a ship was fertile ground for disease to spread.

So the Whitebeard Pirates' medical team was their lifeline. They were always on the lookout for promising recruits. And Deuce met their standards, apparently…

The nurses delivered a message from the ship's head doctor, giggled when they saw Ace, and left the infirmary.

"Must be nice to have all that attention, Deuce,"

scowled Ace as he sat up in bed.

In the intervening weeks, Deuce had become utterly ensconced in Whitebeard's medical team. He was a doctor, a crucial part of their group. Unlike his famous, renowned father, Deuce was a medical school dropout who left home. Ace had never pried into his personal life since their meeting on that empty island, but now he realized

that Deuce must have had quite a lot of potential.

Deuce stared back at Ace. “Think of me what you will. I do not mind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you seen the others?”

“The ones who are on this ship, sure. You, Wallace…”

For the moment, the Spade Pirates members were dispersed throughout Whitebeard’s fleet. The very night that Ace fell in combat,

Deuce led his crewmates in a charge to take back their captain. They were easily defeated and captured. That part was as Thatch had said.

But like Ace, they hadn't been thrown into cells. They were given food. They *were* split apart across the ships of the fleet, rather than kept in one place where they could make trouble, but the main point was that they were all just fine.

"Yeah, I know, I've lost face," Ace admitted. "Whitebeard beat me."

The flag he carried aloft had been broken. And it wasn't just a personal defeat; he had exposed his crew to danger and failed to protect them.

"That's right."

"But I'm not gonna be a loser my whole life! If I can take Whitebeard's head…"

Deuce just sighed. He hesitated, unsure of what to say, and realized that this

attitude was only going to hurt Ace. He had been Ace's traveling partner longer than anyone, so it was up to him.

"The medical team here is incredible."

"What, the nurse babes?"

"No, I'm being serious. The facilities here are equivalent to a hospital in a large town, perhaps even better. Why do you think that is?"

"Don't know, don't care…*ow*!"

Ace rubbed his neck. Despite the fact that he was made of flame, his tussles with Whitebeard were doing serious damage to his body.

In the New World, people with Devil Fruit powers were easy marks—especially Logia fruit, which were the most powerful, and most likely to make their users lazy and reliant on them. Pirates like Jimbei, the Seven Warlords, and the Four Emperors were made of sterner stuff.

That was what it took to be at the *top* of the world of pirates. The level that Ace would need to learn to exceed if he wanted to surpass his hated father…

"That entire medical structure is here to support Whitebeard," Deuce said.

"Eh? Is Whitebeard in bad health?" Ace wondered. That couldn't be right. How could a monster like him be suffering?

"Our health abandons us as we get older. People age, they

grow weaker, and there's no medicine in the world that can counteract that. Not that I know of, at least."

Not unless there was some Devil Fruit out there that could provide eternal life.

"What's your point?"

"I mean that Whitebeard's past his prime. Not like when he used to tussle with Roger."

And Ace was completely helpless against even this version of Whitebeard. They were on completely different

levels. At best, all that Ace could do was match Jimbei the Warlord.

"You're saying I'll never win?"

"Not right now, at least," Deuce stated. "Now, back to what I was talking about. Why does Whitebeard have such a massive medical team? Because Whitebeard's life doesn't just belong to Whitebeard."

"Huh?"

“There are tens of thousands of members of the Whitebeard Pirate Crew. And there are many more times that number living on the islands that make up his territory. All of those lives are under the protection of Whitebeard’s flag. So what would the consequence be if something happened to him?” Hundreds of thousands—millions—of lives were linked inextricably to his.

Ace had only brought together a single ship of people; he couldn’t imagine what it was like to have Whitebeard’s dominion. Whitebeard’s health had to be managed with the greatest possible care, all to prolong the years under his control and stability. All for the sake of those who flew his flag, secure under his rule.

“So…what? You want me to stop trying to kill

Whitebeard?” Ace said, glaring at Deuce.

“That’s for you to decide. But…I think you ought to understand what kind of life it is you’re trying to take.”

“Have you met Whitebeard, Deuce?”

“I haven’t spoken with him. He didn’t ask me to do any of this.”

So he hadn’t tried to woo Deuce into joining his giant crew. And yet he still had the

power to make Deuce argue this point.

"It's like you're a member of the Whitebeard Pirates already," snapped Ace. He immediately looked regretful.

Deuce didn't admonish him. "We challenged Whitebeard to a fight. You, our captain, lost that fight. So the fight is over. We tried to save you, but that was a failure too."

"I guess I don't have any right to argue, then."

"That's not what I'm saying, Ace. We haven't…I haven't gone over to join Whitebeard."

Ace waited in silence.

"It's just…we easily could have all been tossed in the sea to drown. But not only did Whitebeard spare us that fate, he didn't even lock us behind bars or put us in chains. Not even you, our captain."

"Yeah, because they have so little fear of us."

“Perhaps, perhaps. But those are the facts, regardless.”

Ace hung his head. “What are the others doing?”

“They’re all doing their own thing. Skull’s been living up to his strengths, gathering intel. Mihal's teaching those who need it how to read. They’ve put Kotatsu to great use in procuring ingredients for the meals. In fact, Kotatsu was the first one to start working.

He took to Commander Thatch pretty quick once he got fed."

"Huh…"

"Even pirates have rules. There's a certain code of honor to the way we do things. I guess the cat knows the code better than we do."

You work for what you eat. It was a lesson that Ace learned at a young age when he was sent to stay with Dadan the mountain bandit. The others had found ways to put their skills to use as well.

"I haven't lost to Whitebeard," Ace growled. *If I lose—if I admit that I've lost…*

"My only captain is you, Ace. No matter what life you choose to lead, I'll be at your side. If you're going to keep gunning for Whitebeard, I won't stop you. I'm just saying…follow the code."

"Deuce…"

Everyone had begun to live their lives within the Whitebeard Pirate Crew. It was a kind of payment in

return for the mercy Whitebeard showed in sparing their lives and feeding them. The pirate's code of honor demanded it.

"If you're going after Whitebeard, do it openly and in the proper way. Don't force me to betray you," Deuce warned.

It seemed that their captain was the only member of the group who couldn't comprehend where he stood.

—5—

"So Pops knocked ya into the water again today, huh?" sighed Thatch, who was head cook of the *Moby Dick* as well as leader of the Fourth Division.

With a crew the size of the Whitebeard Pirates, meals were a major concern in keeping operations going from day to day. And this was among the ruffians of the waves. Captains who couldn't

keep their subordinates fed while out at sea were not in a good position.

Since Thatch became commander of the Fourth Division, it had been put in charge of managing the crew's kitchen. Its members were all cooks, hunters, or fishermen.

"Mmm, this is quality meat."

"You bet. We got our hands on some marbled wild cattle."

Thanks to the widespread use of saline water filters, the problem of procuring fresh

water on long voyages had been solved. Showers could be had. And if you added nice hot soup (with meat) and bread, rice balls, and tea, most of your problems were solved.

"Cattle? Where do you find cows at sea?"

"You don't, idiot. Kotatsu got off on land and hunted it for us."

"*Grrrr…meow*!"

Whoa, such a cute sound for such a big creature.

As the pirates packed the long bench at the table to eat their meal, they fawned over the wildcat.

"This thing's completely tame, huh?"

"I was the first one to feed him. He kills rats in the larder, hunts in exchange for everything he eats, and he's just a damn fine cat all around. He was very popular on the winter island we stopped at recently. The nurses were squabbling over

which of them got to snuggle with him to keep warm."

"Wow, he's all the rage with the crew. In fact…hang on, you smell like shampoo. Have you been getting baths too, fuzzball?"

"See, Kotatsu's a real pirate. He understands the relationship between favors earned and returned. Not like some other moochers around here."

Kotatsu meowed as he prowled over to Ace and

curled up on the floor. Ace didn’t say a word as he devoured the meat that Kotatsu had brought.

“How long are you gonna keep going after Pops?”

“I dunno.”

“Listen…Whitebeard’s life isn’t just his own concern.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ace, sticking his spoon into his mouth.

“Oh yeah? What do you know?”

"Whitebeard uses that flag to protect his territory. Fish-Man Island and the other places, and all the people living there. If something happened to him…"

Then opportunistic hordes would come from every direction, and stain the ocean red with blood.

"That's right. But you still don't get it."

"Eh?"

"Listen, Ace…if you were a little bit tougher, then you and

your friends wouldn’t be alive right now. We would’ve made certain of that.”

“Huh?!”

In other words, if Ace were an opponent that Whitebeard could not overlook, then his division leaders would have shown no mercy in defending his territory.

But they were spared because Ace was weak.

Kotatsu licked his face, almost as though to comfort him. A cat could be tamed

with enough food. But a human being wasn’t so simple. Because…

Because why?

Because of pride? Pride in what? Because he was frustrated that he lost to Whitebeard?

To begin with, Ace’s ultimate goal was to garner more fame than the King of the Pirates.

He grew up hating his father, and it was the only thing Ace could think of that

would release his heart from the grips of that hatred, so that he could live again. That's why he went after Whitebeard, Roger's former rival. And that rival turned out to be far beyond Ace's reach. Which would mean that his hated father, too, must still be far out of reach…

Ace's troubles hadn't been solved. And that's why he was stuck in such a disgraceful state.

"Does Whitebeard…"

“What?”

“Does he always do this? Tame pirates who try to take his life?”

It’s easy to speak about a man’s greatness, but perhaps this was evidence of it.

“Look, don’t think about it too hard, okay? You’re not really the contemplative type, are you? He’s the same way… He’s easy to understand.”

“Huh?”

“Pops is a pirate. A pirate in the good old style. He shows

you who he is. He’s not two-faced. So he likes others who have that pirate’s way about them. In the fight, you helped your people escape, didn’t you? And you yourself swore not to escape. He likes dummies like you, I think.”

Ace had been a great captain at that moment. That one moment, at least.

“I…”

“If you want to leave, we’re not going to stop you. But if you’re going to eat our food,

then honor the code. The way that Kotatsu and your friends are doing.”

Crash!

A dish shattered.

At the end of the long table where Ace was sitting was a man who was making a ruckus as he ate.

“Hey! This fish pie is especially *delicious*!”

“So don’t smash the plates, Teech.”

“*Zeha ha ha ha!* Oh? What was that, Thatch? Sorry, that

smelt was still too lively!” teased the man who had broken his dish by jabbing a fork all the way through it.

“I’m going to serve you on a steel dish next time.”

“*Zeha ha ha ha!*” the man laughed again. His presence at the meal table changed the atmosphere entirely.

“What’s with *that* guy?” said Ace skeptically. He was a pirate raised by bandits, so if he was creeped out, that was saying something.

The man was large—nearly as big and barrel-chested as Jimbei, but hairy as well.

"That's Teech. He's been in this business a long time." said Thatch. He looked to be in his thirties. He and Thatch treated each other like equals, though Thatch was the division leader.

"So did he know the King of the Pirates, then? But he doesn't have a bounty on his head."

“Actually, you know what? He’s just like you, Ace.”

“Like me? How so?”

“His name’s got—” Thatch started to say. Ace looked up with surprise.

The large man, Teech, was now standing directly over them, staring down with piercing eyes.

“You the hundred-million kid who turned down the Seven Warlords?” The man’s attitude was abrasive, mocking. Ace’s expression stiffened.

"You ate a fruit, right? Which one?"

"It's the Flame-Flame Fruit, he says. Stop getting into it with the youngsters, Teech," Thatch warned.

"Aha! *Zeha ha ha ha!*" Teech laughed, and smacked Ace on the back with incredible force. It caused him to double up coughing.

"*Koff, koff!* What the…?"

"I'm Teech! The name's Marshall D. Teech. So, you've got the Flame-Flame Fruit, eh?

I hear that all the Devil Fruits taste like trash. Is that true?”

“*Koff*… No, I wouldn’t say that. It wasn’t the worst thing I’ve ever eaten,” said Ace. Of course, when he ate it he was starving on an uninhabited island, so flavor was the last thing he was worried about.

“Well, well, that’s a lucky stroke! So a Devil Fruit tastes like trash, but it’s not inedible, huh? I wonder if Pops’s and Marco’s fruits tasted that bad… *Zeha ha ha ha*!”

Braaapp! Teech left the mess hall trailing the stench of a tremendous fart behind him. Ace wrinkled his nose at the stink of it.

"What kind of a stupid laugh is that?" he grumbled.

"I know. He's a big cantankerous bastard…but he's not a bad guy."

"Hmph. If you say so. Hmm? What's up, Kotatsu?" Ace said, looking down.

"*Grrrrr*…"

Kotatsu was curled up on the floor, his tail wound protectively around himself.

"Whoa, he's all freaked out."

"Did he eat some bad squid or something?"

The large cat continued to quiver, never taking his eyes off the door to the mess hall.

—6—

Whitebeard stood on the deck of the ship. Behind him was

Thatch, who had brought Ace up with him.

"Hang on, Ace! You asked me to bring you to Pops because you had business to discuss with him. You didn't say anything about *this*, though," said Thatch, aghast.

"I'm not going to ruin your honor. I mean to do exactly as I just said." Ace stared up at Whitebeard.

Thatch ran his hands over his head in consternation, but did his best to sum it all up.

“So let me get this straight, Ace… You said you owe Pops a debt. What debt is that?”

“You fed my crewmates.”

“You’ve been eating too,” Thatch pointed out.

Ace continued, scratching his head awkwardly. “My point is, it’s honest work for a debt incurred! I’ll repay the favor! I’ll work off what I’ve eaten! That’s…that’s how I’ve lived, ever since I was a kid. I don’t know any other way to do things.”

In other words, he'd made up his mind to do the right thing—he just wasn't quite clear on how to do it.

"So…you're joining us, then? You're going to be Pops' son?"

"No."

"What? You're not?"

"I'm…I'm repaying my debt! I can't dishonor the code in front of my crew! So put me to work," said Ace. He didn't know what he wanted to do,

exactly, so he left it up to Whitebeard.

"Work? What can you do? Are you going to perform odd jobs on deck? A rookie worth nine digits?" wondered Thatch.

"That's not going to pay for the cost of my meals," Ace told him. "I want to work. I want to work enough that you'll owe me, Whitebeard."

"Owe you? What are you hoping to do by putting Pops in debt to you?" Thatch asked.

"When he owes me, then I'll collect. That's the code, isn't it? So when that happens, Whitebeard…I'll demand a duel with you."

"Huh?"

He'd rendered Thatch speechless. Ace still wanted to go after Whitebeard's head. He just wasn't going to be scheming sneak attacks around the clock anymore. The duel would only come when Ace had earned the favor.

Whitebeard mulled over this idea.

"Is that so?" he asked.

"It is so."

"All right, deal. Was that all?"

"Wait…wait, wait, wait! Hold on, Ace! You too, Pops! Just because *you* accept this doesn't mean I will! How many dozens of times has Pops flattened you by now? Why don't you wise up and…"

“The deal’s done,” Ace said, cutting him off. “What would you have me do?”

“Go on and wash some dishes, fireball boy. And sooner or later, I’ll give you a bigger job to do…*Gura ra ra ra*,” Whitebeard chuckled as he vanished into his cabin.

Ace watched him go with a deadly serious look on his face.

And Thatch simply looked lost. “Ahh, that’s right. You might be an idiot, Ace…but

Pops is an idiot when it comes to pirates, too…”

“You heard what we said. This is a challenge between me and Whitebeard. I need you to be our witness, Thatch.”

“Sounds like I’m getting a raw deal here. But if it’s gonna be a duel, there are some rules. Pops’s head won’t come cheap,” said Thatch. He thought it over, then continued, “First of all, you can only challenge him to a

duel when he agrees to it. And if you die as a result, that's on you. Also…"

"Hey, Thatch!" Whitebeard emerged out of his cabin again. "Yes, Pops? What is it?"

"He's an official guest of the crew now. You'll be responsible for him."

"Me? G-great…"

"On the other hand…you're in charge of our kitchen too. So I'll put someone else in charge of giving him work. How about Teech? He's an old

salt, so he knows the way we do things," said Whitebeard.

And with that, he retreated to his cabin again.

—7—

Did you hear that? Fire Fist is our guest now.

What does Pops think he's doing?

Thatch is the one responsible, but it's Teech who's taking care of him…

Portgaz D. Ace was the indisputable topic of conversation for the Whitebeard Pirates during this time. He clearly had a screw loose based on the fact that he wanted a one-on-one duel with Whitebeard. And now he was going to make a name for himself with the crew, just for the opportunity to have that duel?

What in the world could it mean?

"Our crew doesn't really sweat the small details. If there's any question, just follow the code, Pops says. Of course, *he's* the one who will decide what the code is. He gave you the go-ahead, so no one here's gonna complain about your duel," said Teech, Ace's handler.

But what was he "handling," exactly? Ace washed dishes, scrubbed the deck, and hung up the laundry, and Teech gave him no instruction or

advice at any point. He just scarfed food and scratched his ass.

If he challenges Pops a hundred times and still doesn't win, Ace is gonna wear our flag!

How many times has he lost already?!

Rumors swirled around the *Moby Dick*. In the mess hall, Ace complained to the head cook.

"What do they mean, a hundred times? I don't

remember attaching any conditions like that."

"Of course you don't. I spread that part," Thatch said as he prepared a dish. He had added a number of conditions to the duel with Whitebeard, apparently. "A competition's got to have proper terms and limits, after all. You can't say it'll happen ten years later just because you feel like it."

The terms Thatch had cooked up were all over the ship by now. It was common

knowledge to the crew, and they expected those rules to be followed.

"I never said that I'd capitulate and join Whitebeard."

"Well, his head's not gonna come that cheap… Besides, if you can't win in a hundred tries, you're not going to win in a thousand. Here, light the pot." Ace started a fire out of sheer frustration—using his Flame-Flame powers, of course.

"Oooh, that's nice. The most important thing for a wok is the heat! Hey, Ace…if you do join our crew, come to the Fourth Division. I'll craft you into a first-rate flame cook."

"Very funny."

Chapter Five

—1—

"The balance of power in the New World is shifting.

It used to be all about Roger, Shiki the Golden Lion, and Whitebeard…until Roger and Shiki dropped out. Big Mom's always had her own nation, though, even back then," Thatch explained, his hands on the side railing.

"Now it's Whitebeard, Big Mom, Kaido, and Red-Hair," said Ace, listing the names of the Four Emperors.

"Red-Hair's straight from Roger's lineage…but he doesn't have any desire to

carry on his old captain’s will and be King of the Pirates. By comparison, Kaido’s much easier to understand. If you ask me, he’s less of a pirate than a hoodlum. Big Mom’s crew is similar to our crew, generationally speaking, but Charlotte Linlin herself is more like a landlubber pirate now.”

She lived in a castle, surrounded by a family of dozens, making her operation closer to a mafia than a pirate

crew. The territory she controlled was her own nation.

"All the young folks who go into the Grand Line are just looking for a bit of adventure. But…"

Crak-crak-crakk… !

The mast crumbled downward, sail and all, into a wall of flame.

Thatch continued, "If you get past the route through Fish-Man Island, where 70 percent of ships sink already, the New World beyond that is

the haunt of the four Emperors of the Sea, the strongest pirates with their own vast territories. It won't be easy to bring any of them low. The idiots who fail to understand the rules of this business are the first to paint targets on their backs."

The battle was over.

A few dozen pirates from some random crew lay at Thatch and Ace's feet.

"You…you're Fire Fist! The one who turned down the

Warlords…” gasped one of the enemy pirates on the deck, his face grimacing in pain.

These were rookie pirates unaffiliated with any of the Emperors. Back in their homeland and in the “Paradise” of the first half of the Grand Line, they were no doubt big shots who’d made a name for themselves.

But they lasted mere minutes against Ace and Thatch.

Ace never mocked Thatch for “just being a cook,” but in truth, Thatch was more than worthy of the title of Fourth Division leader. He wielded a one-sided blade over three feet long that looked like one of the giant kitchen knives used for dressing large fish and animals.

The division leaders shared ritual cups that placed them on equal footing, none greater than any other. That meant there were at least more

people on the crew of similar profile, a mark of the great depth of the Whitebeard Pirates. He claimed that the Fifth Division commander, Vista, was a far better swordsman, however.

"Has that hundred-million rookie already bent the knee to Whitebeard?!" gasped the pirate.

"Hell no. But it's a complicated situation," said Ace with irritation. "What did

these guys do anyway, Thatch?”

“They messed around in our territory. They ate and drank without paying. Happens all the time.”

“Ah…yeah. That does happen. So I’ve heard.”

“And let me tell you something, Ace. Anyone who eats our food and doesn’t pay up isn’t our guest.”

It was impossible to argue with that. These division leaders protected the towns

flying Whitebeard’s flag. In exchange, the crew received a stipend from those towns in various forms, such as valuables, food and fuel supplies, labor, and so on. If the common people couldn’t get the help of the World Government and Navy, then they’d look to one of the Four Emperors for protection.

“I thought the Navy was like the world’s biggest group of pirates, but in the New World they’re more scarce than

ever," Ace noted. Wouldn't it be the Navy's job to settle these issues?

"They have 'G' branches in place to protect vital facilities, but that's about it. Navy Headquarters is just a military force designed to do the bidding of the World Government."

Their primary mission wasn't to protect the populace from pirates.

"So I guess there's no leeway for rookies like me

making their way into the New World," Ace observed.

"That's right. And it was Red-Hair who actually succeeded at rising to the Emperor level that way."

Shanks came from the Pirate King's pedigree. He was dangerous, but he seemed reasonable enough when they met. You didn't hear any awful rumors about him.

"Our job is to get rid of idiots like these and collect protection money. That raises

the profile and power of our flag. And that's how our territory expands."

"So the pirate crew gets bigger and bigger all on its own, huh?"

The Whitebeard Pirates controlled the sea with their flag, and backed it up by dispatching their forces here and there.

"We don't deal with drugs or slaves in our territory. That's right out the window. Sounds pretty tame for one of the four

baddest pirates in the world, eh?”

“Well, I was never one for adventure or finding the One Piece, anyway.”

“Oh yeah?”

“But I do feel like I’ve got a better understanding of how it is this sea is ruled. That flag isn’t something Whitebeard planted there through an act of force. It’s something that the residents chose to raise on their own…”

So burning that flag on Fish-Man Island wasn’t just an insult to Whitebeard, it was an insult to all the fish-men who lived there.

“You’ve figured that all out, but you’re still going after Pops’s head?” Thatch said. “You want to be more infamous than the King of the Pirates. But you have no interest in the One Piece. You don’t want to bend your own honor code. So what does

your flag of flame actually stand for?”

“I don’t know… Or at least, I thought I did once, but now I don’t.”

Thatch went silent for a bit and smiled. “You’re pretty honest.”

“Mm…”

“Listen, it’s fine. We’ve settled on this duel with Pops. I’m not going back to relitigate that. Now let’s get back to work.” Thatch gave orders to his division. They

would seize all the goods. The ship would be sold on the secondhand market. And the pirates they captured…

"I'm surprised that a division leader like you would get directly involved with this third-rate crew."

"When someone's back is to the wall, they'll easily resort to the stupidest course of action. It's *because* they're third-rate that a higher-up like me has to get involved and make an example of them."

“Is that how it works?”

“You bet,” said Thatch. “Leave it to the lower guys and see what happens. What should have been a simple job turns into—”

Suddenly, the wall of the above-deck cabin broke open, and a man as large as a bear emerged from inside of the ship.

“*Zeha ha ha ha!* Is that the end of it?”

It was Teech. In his hand was a man wearing a captain’s

hat—the enemy leader—gripped around the base of the neck and dangling like a squid hung out to dry.

"Don't destroy the ship, Teech," said Thatch, disappointed.

"Oh, right. This rinky-dink little ship for shrimps."

Teech hurled the enemy captain like a bowling ball. The unfortunate captain of the attempted eat-and-run crew rolled over and over across the deck until he slammed

into the mast. He appeared to be breathing—barely.

One of Thatch's men set up a transponder snail hooked up to a trunk-shaped device. He took a picture of the captain's face and sent it through the fax machine. After a little while, there was a return communication.

Ace picked up the fax and examined it. A skull symbol was in the sender's field—so it was Skull the info agent, still performing his job admirably.

"He's Raccoon the Possum-Player, from the West Blue. A bounty of 75 million berries…"

"Ahh, that's not a paltry amount. We'll hand him over to the Navy, in that case," said Thatch, reading the fax.

"Would they actually pay out a bounty to other pirates?"

"No. There are special brokers you can go through," he explained. Apparently there were those who passed themselves off as bounty

hunters and turned in wanted men, then paid the bounty back to the pirates who caught the target in the first place.

"Teech! Tie that guy up. And as for the others—"

Blam!

Thatch spun around at the sudden sound of a gunshot.

"Oh?" Teech placed a hand to his side. It came away wet and red. At his feet, the dying Captain Raccoon was clutching a pistol.

"Teech!"

“Aieeee! I’ve been shot!” shrieked Teech, shocked by the sight of his own blood.

“Tsk!” Ace was chagrined at the fact that they hadn’t disarmed their target. He pointed a Fire Gun technique at the enemy. There was an awful scream that he never wanted to hear again, like a giant frog being squashed.

“That hurt, you bastard,” said Teech. He had stepped on the enemy captain, whose midsection was now crushed

through the wooden deck, his hands and feet jutting upward. He'd overdone it.

"Oh, great. Hey, you alive down there?"

"*Zeha ha ha ha!*" Teech laughed. Ace wasn't sure how he was meant to react to all of this.

"You all right?" he asked. "You've been shot."

"Hmm? Oh yeah, *zeha ha ha ha*! Owwwwww!" He held a hand over his wound and howled, as though he'd just

remembered it, and began calling for the ship doctor.

"This guy's all kinds of sloppy," muttered Ace. It was just how Marshall D. Teech rolled. And *this* was the guy whose job was to take care of Ace?

"Thatch! The flames are too strong, we can't put them out!" someone yelled out. The flames that had picked up when Ace was fighting were now starting to devour the

wooden ship. It was going to sink.

This was what Thatch meant when he said that having third-rate guys do the work spelled disaster.

—2—

After dispatching the wayward pirates, Ace, Thatch and Teech stopped at the nearest port to share a drink.

“A toast! To Pops’s flag!”

“I’m not toasting.”

"*Zeha ha ha ha*! Food after a job well done tastes so good, it's to die for!"

Eat, fight, drink. Teech was a model pirate. As long as you fed him and let him rumble now and then, you could be assured he wasn't going to cause trouble.

The town was one where Whitebeard's Jolly Roger flew overhead. The trio were pirates, but they were on friendly terms with the owner of the tavern.

“Really, Ace? Red-Hair actually said that?”

With some drinks in them, they were more talkative than usual. Thatch often cooked with alcohol in the kitchen, but never drank it there. It was a sacred workplace for him, so he preferred to relax and drink at other people’s establishments.

“Yeah. He pointed to the scars on his left eye and said, ‘It was the Whitebeard Pirates who gave this to me.’ ”

It was one specific pirate under Whitebeard's flag, in fact.

"So who is it?" Ace asked. "I'm kinda curious."

Thatch thought it over. "Someone on our crew did that to Red-Hair? Hmm…"

"Huh? You mean it's not a well-known fact with you guys?"

That came as a surprise to Ace. You would think that whoever put that scar on Red-Hair's face would have

become quite a legend among the crew.

"It wasn't even a division leader, right? If one of them had done it, that would've been a big deal. You know about this, Teech?"

"Eh? About what?"

"Someone on the crew put a scar on Red-Hair's face, apparently. I just can't believe—"

"That was me," said Teech, through a mouthful of food.

Ace and Thatch stared at the large man before them, one of the senior members of the crew, in total shock. Teech shoved a whole pizza into his mouth without cutting a slice. Then he washed it down with a swig of wine that emptied a small barrel.

"Just kiddin'."

"That's what I figured."

"Yeah, no way."

It was just a stupid drunken joke. Ace sighed. "Well, he told me that at a little party

we were having," he admitted. "Maybe Red-Hair saw me as a rookie and just wanted to scare me a bit."

He took a swig of his drink. Thatch paid attention to the movement of his arm and noted, "By the way, Ace…what's with that joke of a tattoo you've got?"

It was something he'd been wondering about and used the drunken opportunity to ask. The question was one that Ace

had heard many times over the years.

"Nah, never mind. Don't wanna talk about it." It was a long tale to tell, and it wasn't particularly interesting.

"Oh yeah?"

"The X through the S is the symbol of my late brother. That's all."

Right after he went to sea to become a pirate, Ace's blood brother Sabo was sunk by a Celestial Dragon ship.

Ace made an oath then with his little brother, Luffy.

Listen to me, Luffy. We have to live our lives so we don't have any regrets!

That could mean a lot of different things to different people. The point was not to do anything you'd be ashamed of.

"*Only time can answer that question*."

It was after Sabo's death, when he first had to truly grapple with the concept of

death, that Ace began to think in earnest about what it meant to live.

Death would come one day. So the last thing he wanted to do was go out with nothing to remember but hating his father and the world. Leading such a pointless life would be an insult to the brothers he shared ritual cups with.

But Ace wasn’t the type to speak freely about his innermost thoughts, or the names of his brothers.

“Hmmm.”

“I do have another brother, though.”

“Oh yeah? How old? What’s he doing now?”

“Three years younger than me. We decided that we’d set out to be pirates when we turned seventeen. So he should be leaving any day now.”

“Is he strong?”

“My brother ate a Devil Fruit when he was a little kid. I didn’t eat mine until after I

was a pirate. But I never lost a fight to him, even back then."

Ace and Sabo had always competed with one another and kept score. Luffy joined the competition when he got a bit older, but as the youngest, he always lost.

"*So long, Luffy. I'm heading out now!*"

"*Okay! When I go out to sea three years from now, I'll be way tougher than I am now!*"

Ace left Luffy behind at Mt. Corvo and started his personal voyage.

Luffy was probably still dreaming of being King of the Pirates. Ace couldn’t even begin to imagine Luffy looking defeated or ready to give up. Now Ace had run up against the wall that was the Four Emperors. What would Luffy say at a time like this?

“A Devil Fruit, huh?” marveled Thatch. Drinking put him in a good mood. “We got

a couple guys with Devil Fruit powers, too. Marco, Jozu, Pops…”

Ace hadn’t even been powerful enough to antagonize Whitebeard into using the powers that made him such an infamous monster.

“The rule around here is, if you find the Devil Fruit, you get to eat it. You could sell it and make a hundred million berries, of course. But if I could choose one Devil Fruit to have, it would be yours, Ace.”

“Why the Flame-Flame Fruit?” wondered Ace.

“Your hands turn into fire, right? What more could a cook like me ask for? And I could make it whatever temperature I want.”

They say the cook’s soul is his knife, but flame could be something like a lifetime partner.

“I get it. If only there’d been one for you, too.”

When Ace was washed up on the deserted island, he’d

eaten the Devil Fruit without realizing what it was.

"It doesn't work that way, does it? There's only one of any kind of Devil Fruit in the entire world at a time, I understand."

"Yeah, that's right! If you really want to eat the Flame-Flame Fruit," Teech said, happily brandishing a table knife now that he had finished his barrel of wine, "you'll have to kill Ace… *Zeha ha ha ha*! Once the person

with the powers dies, the fruit will regrow somewhere else in the world."

"It's a bad joke. There's no fruit I want to eat so bad I'd kill someone for it. Another wine over here, Miss!" said Thatch to the barmaid.

Ace just grimaced. "Then you'll have to forget about the Flame-Flame Fruit. What about another one? Let's say…an ice fruit, maybe. You wouldn't need an ice chest."

“No, that one’s out, too. Aokiji ate that,” said Thatch with a shake of his head.

“Aokiji? You mean…”

“The admiral from Navy Headquarters.”

Kuzan, who went by the nickname Aokiji, had the power of the Chilly-Chilly Fruit. The other admirals, Akainu and Kizaru, had Logia powers of their own.

“What about a knife? You could be a blade man who could cut anything.”

"That would be nice. But no, I think some assassin somewhere has that one. Besides, I *like* sharpening my knives."

"*Zeha ha ha ha*! Well, even after years and years of pirating, you just don't see Devil Fruits all that often!"

"What about you, Teech? What fruit would you eat?" Ace asked, turning the tables on him.

"Me? Let's see…"

He took a swig from his barrel. Teech was so large that any vessel looked too small in his hands.

"Oh, I bet I know which one you want," said Thatch, looking mischievous.

"What?! How do you know, Thatch?!" gasped Teech, suddenly looking shocked.

"Which one?"

"You know the one, Ace. The legendary Clear-Clear Fruit! Whoever eats that fruit can turn invisible…"

“Really? There’s a fruit that does that?!”

“*Zeha ha ha ha*! Ya got me!” laughed Teech, scratching his head and sticking out his tongue.

“But of course, it’s every man’s dream…”

The uncouth scallywags imagined all the unsavory things they would do if they could turn invisible with the Clear-Clear Fruit’s power.

At that point, it dawned on them that several young girls

had gathered at the table. They were children from the port. Their parents could be seen outside the restaurant where the pirates were celebrating.

"What's this? We have such pretty young ladies here!" Thatch said, greeting them with a smile.

"This is a sign of our gratitude!" said the girls, presenting them with crowns of flowers picked from nearby fields.

"Oooh, such pretty flowers. Thank you," said Thatch smoothly, bowing his head.

"No, thanks…I'd rather not," said Ace, trying to push the flowers away.

"C'mon, Ace! Don't embarrass these young ladies—they're trying to thank you!"

"*Zeha ha ha ha*!"

Thatch took his flowers, and Teech held out a finger to drape them over. Since Ace didn't want to make himself

the bad guy, he hesitated and reluctantly allowed them to place the circlet over his head.

Had he ever received flowers before? He'd expected that even after he was dead in his grave, no one would come to place flowers at his headstone.

This was the remarkable nature of Whitebeard's rule. The man exerted an incredible influence. And he used that power as the cornerstone of his territory, forming his own

country. A country where people welcomed his rule. Where little children accepted the protection of a man more frightening than any demon, and even thanked him for it.

Power was a weapon that could be used to achieve ambitions. Sometimes, power enveloped others inside of it, becoming an even greater power. It was why people called Whitebeard the King of the Sea.

That was the man Ace was trying to crush.

"Are you guys good pirates?" asked one of the younger girls.

"Huh? I…uh…"

What was a good pirate? Was it a pirate who protected the people in his territory? To those from other locales, that same man might be considered a terrible pillager. And nobody who was truly a benevolent saint would get

involved in the business of piracy in the first place.

"Listen up, girls," said Teech to the children, "There are no good or bad pirates."

He placed the flowers they gave him onto his plate of pasta and promptly began to devour his food, plants and all. The girls stared at him in shock; the last thing they expected was for him to eat their flowers.

"Mmm, these sure are good flowers! Gimme yours too, Ace!"

"Here you go."

"All right, that's enough of that!" said Thatch, clapping his hands loudly. "I'm sorry this old man and this young fellow are so boring and don't make any sense, girls. But thank you very much. If I come back in twenty…no, *ten* years, will any of you agree to marry me?"

"Ew! No!"

“Aw…”

—3—

In the infirmary of the *Moby Dick*, Deuce received an unexpected patient.

Lately he’d been taking on more and more duties from the head ship doctor; routine tasks like stitching up cuts and treating wounds.

“Ah, there you are, Doc. Perfect.”

"Oh! Great… Master Whitebeard," said Deuce, awkwardly jumbling up his response to the other man out of shock and nerves.

Ace was technically Whitebeard's guest, and the Spade Pirates would be considered something like his younger brothers, formally speaking. Deuce's captain was Ace—he couldn't start calling Whitebeard "Pops."

"Don't get all hung up on formalities. I want you to take

a look at this," said Whitebeard, as he sat and extended his arm from the coat he wore loosely over his shoulder to reveal his palm.

"You've got a burn." So even legendary monsters could get hurt. "Do you feel any pain? It doesn't look terrible, but you should probably keep it iced until the pain stops. How did you get it?"

Whitebeard said nothing. Despite having asked the

question, Deuce already had a pretty good idea of how it happened.

"Was it Ace?"

Ace had just been challenging Whitebeard to a fight minutes ago. He'd lost, yet again, and was thrown into the sea. How many dozens of times had it been?

"Yeah, it's pathetic… Don't tell anyone about this, Doc."

"Please, don't call me Doc. I'm only a medical student."

He washed the afflicted area and treated it to encourage natural healing, without the use of disinfectant.

"Thanks, kid."

"Infection is a concern, so keep your hand clean," Deuce warned.

"That captain of yours…"

"Y-yes?"

"He's gotten stronger. I forget how many times we've fought now…"

For the first time ever, he'd landed a blow with his fiery

fists. Whitebeard got to his feet; it almost looked as though he were smiling.

Deuce checked in his memo book. “Today was the ninety-ninth time.”

“You keep track in a book? Meticulous little snot, aren’t ya?”

“It’s just the way I am. He’s got one more shot. Will Ace get to you?” Deuce asked. He didn’t expect an answer.

“Ah yes, it was only a hundred, huh? That’s what

Thatch or someone decided. I don’t care if we go to a hundred times or a thousand times.”

“Are you…training Ace?”

“Don’t expect too much from me, Doc… *Gura ra ra ra*,” Whitebeard chuckled. “I just like the sort of fools who try to tackle the New World. If he wants to stick around, so be it.”

He’d give the youngsters a roof over their heads. And if

they wound up on his ship, he'd feed them.

"Ace is…"

He's the son of Roger, your rival. And the World Government is probably aware of that possibility, hence the invitation by the Seven Warlords.

Deuce was concerned. What if the progeny of the King of the Pirates found his place with Whitebeard, Emperor of the Sea? Wouldn't that be throwing a significant hitch in

the delicate balance of power between Navy HQ, the Warlords, and the Emperors? It could be enough to spark the next big war…

"Hmm?"

"Never mind."

It wasn't for Deuce to say. Only Ace could decide whether or not to reveal that fact.

"Ace wanted to make a name for himself. That's why he's been going after you."

"That's what I don't get. If he wants to raise his profile,

the Seven Warlords should have been enough. Why does he fixate on me? If he wanted to hunt down an Emperor, he could've gone after Red-Hair. Or did he think that coming for the old man would be easiest?"

"No. He followed the code with Red-Hair. They had a connection already, it seems. Shanks once saved the life of Ace's little brother."

"Ohhh."

"And Ace had another brother who died. I haven't heard much more beyond that," Deuce said, choosing his words carefully.

He recited the whole story: Ace's parents being dead at his birth. His hatred for the Great Era of Piracy. His upbringing by bandits. His brother, who went to sea to become a pirate, as they had vowed to one another, only to be promptly killed by Celestial Dragons. Only one thing did

he make sure to keep secret: that Ace's father was none other than Roger.

"I see," said Whitebeard, assessing the young man under his care. "So that fireball kid didn't actually want to be a pirate. I think I understand him a bit better."

"Meaning…"

"He went to sea to fulfill an oath he took with his brothers. That's all. And then that happened with the Celestial Dragons… So that's what

continues to burn inside of him.”

Perhaps he was right. Ace wanted fame because it would erase the memory of his hatred for his father. Becoming a pirate was a means to that end, but it wasn’t the point in and of itself.

“I think…Ace doesn’t even understand who he really is.”

“That’s true of everyone. Especially when you’re young,” said Whitebeard.

The only ones who thought they knew themselves were idiots who fancied themselves clever, and the elderly who'd given up on finding themselves.

"Being here on the ship and providing medical care, I've started to realize something. I gave up on medical school and went to sea as a reaction to my father, who is a doctor. It might be a stupid reason, but…"

"That ain't true. Parents are a major issue for anyone, for any reason."

"I met Ace, I met other companions, and I made it here. That's all thanks to Ace. But all I've been doing is chasing after the sights that Ace has been showing me—places that I would never reach on my own. And now Ace is unsure of himself. What if his hatred is the source of what will destroy him, but not a reason for him to go on?

Running into the wall that is Whitebeard has made that contradiction clear.”

The Spade Pirates, who had been so reliant upon Ace to lead them, were pulverized by Whitebeard’s tsunami.

“You got a lot of complicated thoughts in your head, Doc… *Gura ra ra ra*,” laughed Whitebeard. But he seemed to understand what made Deuce tick, too. “I ain’t a wall, or anything of the sort.

I can’t take care of ya to that extent.”

“I’m sorry. Can’t tell who’s helping care for whom at this rate.”

“Listen, Doc. A wall’s something you build in your own heart. People can only change themselves into who they want to be.”

—4—

Be my son.

Whitebeard had extended his hand to Ace after the younger pirate tried to kill him.

It was the way of the pirate life. The commanders of Whitebeard's various divisions had all shared ritual cups with him, making them father and sons. The captains of the various prominent crews under Whitebeard's umbrella had shared cups with Whitebeard or one of his commanders, making them

brothers or kin as well. That was why everyone in the Whitebeard family called Edward Newgate “Pops.”

The World Government ruled through a legal and judicial system. The pirate world was connected through a system of flags and ritual cups.

And the person at the top of the pirating world was no mere destroyer.

Ace found himself thinking often of the young girls who

had brought them flowers. The Four Emperors of the sea were called that because they created their own little empires within the territory they controlled—a fact that Ace gradually came to understand as he traveled around Whitebeard's territory and fought on his ship.

Be my son.

Father and son cups. In a literal sense, it meant becoming his subordinate, but to Ace, son of the demon

named Roger, the idea that anyone would choose to say “I will make you my son.” came as nothing less than a total shock. Even if Whitebeard didn’t actually know Ace’s background.

“And what would happen to that offer of cups if I told him?” he grumbled to himself, sitting on the gunwale.

He hadn’t ever really thought about how Whitebeard might have felt

about Roger. The stories told that they were rivals…

"…and that's why Thatch ain't coming," said Teech.

They were on a speedy midsize ship, sailing alone, without Whitebeard's flag overhead.

"Huh? Why isn't Thatch coming?"

"Do I need to loosen your jaw to make you listen? Huh?" Teech threatened.

He was a violent man who lost all control in the midst of

a fight, but he'd been part of Whitebeard's crew for decades. Apparently Whitebeard was magnanimous with his ritual cups, if they included a man like him.

"*Zeha ha ha ha*! We're on our way to an island! And we're gonna take care of the scumbag who dared to disrespect Pops's flag! We gotta beat some lessons into his thick skull about the pirate's honor code!"

"And it's up to me to perform that punishment."

"*Zeha ha ha ha*… That's why Thatch ain't comin'. Pops put this one on your shoulders, Ace."

It was in order to take a measure of who Ace was. And as his caretaker, Teech was there to observe and report back on his performance. A very simple arrangement.

An island was visible ahead. It was night—a black curtain spanning the sky overhead,

sprinkled with dots of light. And glittering off of the black water below was the reflection of bright lights like fishing lures. The town was a big one.

They were on the outskirts of Whitebeard's territory. There was a problem on this island that could not be ignored. Whitebeard had dispatched Ace to take care of it.

And the price he would pay was their duel. The hundredth

confrontation, and most likely the last…

"All right, people, listen up," Ace said to the pirates around him. "This operation's under my command: Portgaz D. Ace. But I ain't your division leader. I'm not even in the Whitebeard Pirates. Some of you might not like that. If you've got a problem with following my orders, remove yourself from the mission now."

His speech had the pirates eyeing one another. But this was all on Pops's orders, so no one raised any complaints. They decided to see what he could do.

"Then let's go. Wallace, Banshee," he said, calling two of his Spade Pirates.

"Captain Ace…"

"You sure you want me?" said Banshee hesitantly.

"This was Deuce's idea. We could simply raid the place, but I don't wanna just follow

orders, do you? I’m gonna check out the scene first. Help me do that.”

—5—

The island of Port Chibaralta.

There were many ships moored at the dock of the bustling town. It was a place full of taverns and pleasure halls, a town that indulged all of a sailor’s desires. And not just pirates, but the crews of passenger ships and Navy

vessels as well—a place where the payment for completing a dangerous voyage could be spent within a week on booze and women. But such men would never advance from the position of deckhand for the rest of their lives.

This night was the annual Festival of Thanks.

The entire town was lit up with bright and garish decorations. Tourists wore whatever costumes they fancied, and adults and

children headed out onto the streets. Photographers offered their services here and there. The roads were lined with merchants hawking all kinds of wares, and every store was packed. It was a vivid example of how money makes the world go round—in both legitimate and illegitimate ways…

"Hey, what's this glass of suds you're selling? Piss?!"

Here in a casino, the floor lined with old-fashioned

tatami mats, a game of dice was unfolding.

Many sailors, both pirates and Navy alike, came and went from the game. It was an active one, due to the festival. And when the game got lively, trouble tended to follow.

“Dammit, I lost again! Every roll is backfiring on me. I bet it’s your doing, you lowlife cheater.”

“Even a Navy man shouldn’t go accusing people without

evidence, Captain," said the man managing the game, attempting to soothe the drunken gamblers. Swearing and insulting the quality of the refreshments was one thing, but there was no dirtier word than "cheater."

This only put the inebriated Navy captain in a fouler mood, however.

"What?!"

Things were getting out of hand. The staff of the gambling den stirred to action

and began to prepare for trouble when another man appeared.

"How are you, Captain? Makin' a *killing* at the game, are we?"

It was…a gorilla.

A figure in a flashy striped suit, rippling muscles…and a gorilla costume mask, to be exact.

"Oh, is that you, Oliva? Your games are the most tightfisted I've ever played. They don't pay out squat!" grumbled the

captain to the man in the gorilla mask.

"Ah…you've had too much to drink," said the gorilla man, clapping his hands. "I need you to leave, sir. You're bothering the other guests."

"What?" growled the captain, even angrier at this unexpectedly formal treatment.

"Ahh, and I see here that you've built up quite a tab. Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to square up," the

gorilla man said, clenching his fists until the joints popped. There were thick rings of pure gold on all of his fingers. A secretary nearby began to slide beads on an abacus to calculate his receipt. He had been losing tremendously—more than several years' salary for a Navy HQ captain.

"What the hell is this?!"

"I can see why you're a captain at Navy Headquarters,

sir. You even lose like a real man.”

“This is nonsense! I refuse! I won’t pay a single berry to the cheaters trying to rip me off!”

“Captain…I’m sure you know whose flag flies over this town.”

Right outside of the gambling den, next to the swinging sign that identified it to potential customers, was the flag bearing Whitebeard’s skull and bones.

That threat intimidated the captain, but his pride willed him back to his feet.

"Whitebeard? Who cares?! I'm a Navy Headquar—*brft!*" *Crunch!* The man's mug of sudsy booze went flying.

The gorilla man pounded the Navy HQ captain from above. Just one punch sent the captain to the floor, unconscious.

"Seize his goods."

The mark of those heavy rings left an imprint on the

captain’s cheek. The side of his face was caved in, the bones themselves bent with the force of the blow.

The man took off his gorilla mask to reveal…a gorilla face. His features looked about 30 percent human and 70 percent gorilla.

“Even a Naval officer can’t walk out of my—er, Whitebeard’s gambling den without paying out his losses.”

Oliva wiped his bloody fist on the captain’s cloak, which

was embroidered with the word “Justice,” and commanded his employees to clean up the bothersome guest.

Two middle-aged women with sagging bellies and heavy makeup approached Oliva and handed him a midsized leather bag. It was packed with wrapped stacks of bills.

“Hey, hey, hey-hey-hey!” Oliva cried in rhythm, clapping twice. “Apologies for that disgraceful little show! This is

the Festival of Thanks and it only comes once a year! It’s time to play big or go home, my friends!”

—6—

In a bar off the main road sat an assortment of fathers who’d sent their families off to march in the costume parade, mixed in with other unremarkable types who weren’t taking part in the festivities.

Given the times, idle chatter among people with too much time on their hands always turned to pirates, sooner or later.

“How many decades ago did Gold Roger die?! Why haven’t people moved on from all this King of the Pirates and One Piece stuff already?” said a disheveled, skinny hoodlum, leaning against the counter of the bar as though he were dispensing great wisdom.

“Yeah, Roger was a real low-down lowlife, the worst of the worst,” agreed the young man next to him.

Enter a young man named Ace. His hat was pulled low and he wore a cloak over his shoulders to disguise himself as a simple wanderer. He was wearing a cheap, flimsy mask that was little more than a fake nose; a cheap trinket he’d purchased from a roadside stand, as though he’s just needed something to

allow him to take part in the festivities. In fact, the nose had a long mustache attached—only after he bought it did he realize it was probably supposed to be a Whitebeard mask.

"Oh? You think so too, pal? That's right, it ain't the era of brute strength anymore! Adventure? Treasure maps? Are those things really worth putting your life in danger?"

"Drink up, pal," said Ace, pouring more booze into the

mug of the hoodlum, who was already quite red-faced.

"Thanks for the refill, friend… What were we talkin' about again?"

"The guy who runs this town," said Ace. He'd picked out the hoodlum in the bustling center of the town in the hopes of getting the word straight from the street.

"That's Oliva, of course! After the old boss passed away, the kid took over his position."

"Yeah, you said that before. What was the old boss like?"

"Oh, he was…um, an old-fashioned pirate, in all the good an' bad ways. When he forged ties with Whitebeard and brought prosperity to Port Chibaralta, that was great. But he was real big on rules. Don't do this, don't do that, blah blah blah…"

"Certain things are taboo in Whitebeard's territory. Like drugs…"

"And slaves."

As one might guess from the fact that he included Fish-Man Island as part of his territory, Whitebeard did not abide by formalized systems of racial prejudice and slavery.

"People and ships come through Port Chibaralta all the time. Money changes hands here every second of the day. Casinos, fights, concerts, all manner of entertainment… Even a little bar like this one does a lotta business. But the old boss decided to outlaw all

buying and selling of slaves in this town, in exchange for the protection of Whitebeard's flag," said the hoodlum.

Now that he was drunk, he was a complaining machine. Apparently he'd previously been a successful broker for slavers, but now he was reduced to small-time jobs to get by.

Port Chibaralta's fortune was built upon the profits generated by gambling and entertainment at the port. The

bars and taverns, hotels, shipbuilders, public markets…all of them fell under Oliva's racket. And by paying a portion of that up to Whitebeard, he received the protection of a flag backed by tens of thousands of soldiers.

And the World Government and Navy had no control there. They couldn't interfere. Navy ships did stop at the port from time to time, of course, but it was always handled with hush money under the table;

each side trying not to cause trouble with the other. Though of course, given their position as the attack dogs of the government, the Navy was always looking for a chance to carve up the Four Emperors' territory and weaken their stranglehold on the New World…

"See, there's so much money rolling through this port! So when Oliva took over, he started to reform the old

ways and loosen those regulations!”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to ask about,” said Ace. He looked around carefully and brought out a picture.

The hoodlum held his breath. “Hey pal, that’s a mermaid!”

It was a picture of a young mermaid—along with a single mermaid scale, still fresh.

“You bet. One of the girls who used to be a hit attraction at the Mermaid Café.”

“You mean,” the hoodlum gasped, his voice a whisper now, “you’ve got a young mermaid?”

He couldn’t hide his excitement. The only people legal to sell as slaves were criminals like pirates, and residents of countries who were not members of the World Government. A slave’s price could vary quite a lot by race and sex, but young mermaids were some of the most valuable, worth up to

tens of millions of berries. If you put one on auction at the Sabaody Archipelago, a Celestial Dragon was likely to push up the price as high as necessary to win.

"Yeah, and I'm not sure how to sell her off. I heard some stories about this place, so I came here. See, I'm technically under Whitebeard's care at the moment. I don't want to do anything that breaks his moral code, but…"

"Moral code, shmoral code! Whitebeard's just another stupid pirate."

Ace waited.

"What makes him any different from hooligans like us? He steals, and pillages, and kills…and kills and kills and kills until he stands atop all the other villains in the world. And then he wants to get on his high horse and say 'Don't sell slaves'? What a hypocrite! All of us live by taking things from one

another! Pirates take lives! And slavers take freedom… So what's the difference?"

The man sure did like to state his case. Ace fixed the hoodlum with a hard stare.

"Let's say, hypothetically…that my mermaid got away without me knowing, and *happened* to get sold to someone else. That's not my fault, right?"

"Nope. Not your fault at all, friend."

"I can go fifty-fifty. I just want her off my hands," Ace said, laying out the bait.

"Seventy-thirty."

"Don't get greedy."

"Who's the greedy one? I'm the guy sticking his neck out."

"Fine, fine… When you see her in person, your eyes'll pop out," Ace said, sticking the photo and scale into the hoodlum's pocket.

The photo was one that Ace's crew took at the Mermaid Café on Fish-Man

Island. And the scale was from a mermaid he happened to know…

"Oooh, that nice, huh? You haven't been messin' with her at all, right? Well, Oliva will decide the price, anyway."

"And when can I meet this Oliva guy?"

"Tonight's the Festival of Thanks; it's a once-a-year business opportunity, and Oliva's a busy man. But a mermaid will change the dynamic entirely. Just you

wait, I'll put in the good word for you!" said the hoodlum ingratiatingly, and rushed off to speak with his boss.

—7—

It was late at night.

There was a large tent set up in an open space some distance from the center of Port Chibaralta. It was a circus tent, in fact. During the day it was a popular tourist attraction for families, but it

was closed now, without a soul around.

Until a figure appeared on the darkened path, pulling a cart.

The cart contained some very large wooden boxes. There were shackles on the ankles of the man pulling it. Behind the cart were more men in chains, carrying heavy boxes of their own.

“Here you are.”

Ace led the cart and its procession through the

entrance to the circus tent and into the rear area, where the hoodlum from earlier awaited.

Ace greeted the man without a word, pointing out his cargo. The man who pulled the cart fell to his knees with exhaustion.

“Ahh, you’ve got a fish-man slave too, eh?”

“Helps with the heavy lifting,” Ace explained. Wallace was the one pulling the cart.

“And the product is inside of that box?”

“Yeah.”

One box on the cart had the word *MERMAID* written on the top for easy identification.

“I just want to check it out before I call for Oliva,” the hoodlum said. Ace opened up a little window hatch on the box. Through it was a glimpse of a mermaid’s fin.

“Let me out,” said a frightened woman’s voice, husky and sexy.

“Oooh!” The hoodlum was elated. If this deal went well,

a mermaid would bring in tens of millions, possibly over a hundred.

"I want this over with quick."

"Hang on to your skivvies, I'm getting Oliva now. I asked him to wait nearby," said the hoodlum, picking up a transponder snail and placing a call.

"The deal's on," he said, putting down the transponder snail. "Oliva's on his way here. You can sit down and wait."

“Okay.” Ace sat in a nearby chair.

“Say, what’s that other big box for?” asked the hoodlum, glancing at another box on the cart.

“It’s a different product. I wouldn’t look inside if I were you. It’s a hideous wild beast; I’ve got it asleep for now.”

“Yikes.” The hoodlum quickly backed away from the cart.

"I saw the festivities on the way here. They're very impressive."

"Yeah, Oliva makes sure we go all-out here!"

"What's he like?"

"If I had to describe him in one sentence…I've never seen a more refreshing man."

"Refreshing?"

Makin' a killing… Makin' a killing…

A loud voice emerged from the middle of the tent.

Whoosh!

A man dressed in a flashy striped suit appeared. He was darkly tanned, with a sharply defined undercut. From thumb to pinky, his hands were covered with rings like gold nuggets. He was accompanied by a middle-aged woman with thick makeup and a secretary working an abacus.

His features and figure conveyed one thing: gorilla.

“That’s…refreshing?”

“It’s refreshing to see a guy who loves making money this much. Hey, Oliva!”

“Yo, hoodlum. What’s going on? You makin’ a killing?” said Oliva the gorilla, raising a hand in greeting.

“I sure am. Tonight’s festival is a huge success!”

“Guess you’re makin’ more money than you know what to do with!”

They were certainly enjoying themselves.

“The people in this stretch of sea work hard and save up all year long, just for this festival. And our business model is to do whatever it takes to loosen the purse strings of all these miserable paupers who come to our town!”

“That’s our Oliva! You’ve got it all figured out, sir! But…can you let *me* be the star tonight?”

“I hear you’ve got a major item to sell,” said Oliva. He

looked in Ace’s direction at last.

The man was imposing, that much was certain. Your average citizen would probably curl up into a ball with just one hard glance from Oliva.

“Sorry to bother you on such a busy day,” said Ace, doffing his hat. He kept his fake nose on, though.

“Spare me the formalities. So this item is in your possession, eh? You’re a young one. And this is it, eh?”

Oliva said, looking at the box marked *MERMAID*.

"Hang on, sir, I'll open—"

"Makin' a killing, *yah*!"

With a tremendous crack, Oliva punched the wooden box himself with his heavy-ringed fist, smashing it to smithereens.

And inside the box was a certain mermaid…

"*Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!*" the hoodlum screamed, his voice shrill with shock. He grabbed

Ace and hastily pulled him aside.

"What's the matter?"

"What the…what the hell is that?! That's not the mermaid in the photo… She's an old hag! What kind of a scam are you running here?!"

He pulled out the picture Ace had given him and jabbed at it angrily, comparing the two.

The contents of the wooden box was undoubtedly a mermaid. But it was a

mermaid who had passed into middle age, beyond the point where her fins had separated into legs. In other words, it was Banshee.

"That's her in the picture, all right. You got bad eyesight or something?" Ace asked him.

"Who do you think you are, the boy who cried mermaid?!" the hoodlum snapped. Already, he could feel the life draining from his body.

Oliva stared dully at the mermaid who emerged from the box.

“Ah…ooooh…”

“What are you starin’ at?” glared Banshee, who had put on makeup and even wore a mermaid swimsuit.

Oliva scooted backward, apparently shocked into silence. Then he beckoned the hoodlum over in what seemed like embarrassment. Now it was their turn to head to the sidelines to speak.

"Hey, hoodlum. What's going on here?"

"I'm sorry, Oliva! That youngster lied to me… I can't believe it! Don't worry, I'll make sure he pays the price! Hey! Hey, *you*! Nobody humiliates Oliva and gets away with it!"

"I never knew…a real mermaid could be so…*beautiful*…" Oliva murmured.

"Yeah, she's beautiful, all ri—*Beautiful?!*" the hoodlum

gaped. Oliva already had a lovestruck look in his eyes as he stared at Banshee. “Oliva, you have…working eyesight, right?”

“Well, they do say that a man is struck blind when he lays eyes on a true beauty… Hey, youngster!” Oliva hailed Ace.

“Yes, sir? How can I help you?”

“I’ll buy that mermaid from you! No auctions or brokers or nothin’. I’ll take her. I’m buyin’

her for myself!” he said, looking Banshee over from head to fin as he made his decision.

“Umm…”

Ace scratched his head, puzzled. The hoodlum rushed back over to Ace and whispered in his ear, “Hey! Don’t get any funny ideas and start raising your asking price now!”

“I wasn’t gonna….”

“Master Oliva seems to have taken a liking to your mermaid hag.”

“But…why? Deuce’s plan didn’t account for something like this…”

“Plan? Who?”

“Never mind, ignore that.”

“Fine! I don’t care! In any case, you can see what’s going on here. He loves older women!” the hoodlum said, pointing out the flabby woman at Oliva’s side. “But every cloud has a silver lining, I

guess. Put on a smile, man! Show him everything's cool! Go on and give him the OK sign!"

"Fine, fine. Hang on, I need to talk this over with her."

"Talk? With the slave? What would you need to talk about?!"

"Plenty. It's a business, you know," said Ace. He walked over to Banshee and began to converse with her quietly.

"What's going on here, Ace?" she whispered.

“I dunno, but it seems to be working so far. Just stick to our plan…”

He showed off a glimpse of a scrap of paper in his hand. It was a piece of Banshee’s vivre card, an item that would perpetually point in the direction of its owner.

They would likely take Banshee to where the other slaves were. Ace’s mission was to learn the full scope of the covert slave trade on Port Chibaralta. And the ultimate

goal was to make an example of those who mocked Whitebeard's flag and all it stood for.

"All right, fine."

"Sorry about this, Banshee. But actually, it sounds like that guy really likes you. Whatcha wanna do about that?"

"Do about it? Why would I get with that gorilla?!"

"Look, you're a woman in your prime. I know that being a pirate can be lonely—you don't meet many people," he

said, in an attempt to be sensitive that probably wasn't helping.

"Well, I want nothing to do with a young fellow like him, all blinged out with rings. I like dashing older men like Whitebeard, and men who can cook, like Thatch."

"Hey, you done talking over there?" yelled the hoodlum. Ace gave him a disarming smile.

The price didn't actually matter for the plan, but Oliva

quoted an amount suitable for a young mermaid, not an old one with legs. Ace decided to take the offer on the spot.

The secretary produced a trunk packed full of bills. Ace checked that they were authentic.

“It’s all there.”

“Ahh, this was a good purchase. Let me know if you ever snag a find like this again, fella!” Ace and Oliva shared a firm handshake.

“By the way, what kind of slaves do you normally deal in, Mr. Oliva?”

“Hmm? Well, you’re in the right place,” Oliva said. He gave his secretary a look. “Go on.”

She walked over to a switch on a tentpole and flipped it. The lights turned on.

Ace gasped. A mountain of metal cages surrounded them.

A circus was a wild animal show, after all. There were lions, bears, even elephants in

these cages. And among the animals were human slaves. And other races as well. Some of them shrank away in fear at the sight of Oliva, others were as still as the dead, and a few slammed the metal bars in fury.

"You're keeping your slaves in the circus…"

It was a sickening sight for Ace. When he thought about the slave trade, he thought about Celestial Dragons.

"It's a traveling circus, you see. When you've got this many cages, no one really seems to pay any heed to the fact that there are a few slaves mixed among them."

Whether male or female, there were buyers to be found, as long as the slaves were young.

But dealing with slaves was forbidden in Whitebeard's territory. So it wasn't worth the risk unless the products were valuable. That meant

infamous pirates or excellent singers or dancers…or rare species like mermaids and mermen.

Ace asked Oliva, “Aren’t you afraid of Whitebeard finding out that you’ve got so many slaves within his territory?”

“My old master’s the one who shared drinks with him. Not me.”

“That might be true, but Whitebeard’s flag still flies over this island. It’s protecting everyone here.”

"The flag? Those kinds of complications are a thing of the past now," said Oliva. His tone of voice was colder and clearer than before.

Wham! He strode over to a cage and kicked the bars, threatening the slave inside.

"Meaning?"

"It's a new era. For pirates, and everyone else. Young guys like us, we're not gonna be swayed by some old stories from our childhood…from before we were born, even…

That guy who died ages ago, Roger? I’m not gonna have my life dictated by people whose minds are clouded by rumors of some legendary treasure he talked about. Dreams aren’t for me! They’re something I show to others, so I can make a killing off of them! It ain’t the era of brute strength anymore! The One Piece? Tell me something, do you think all those people who risk their lives for adventure and come away with nothing more than

a handful of coins are smart? Look at this town. If you stay in one place, put down roots, and do honest work, your money will make money for you! Customers will gladly come and give you their money! I swear, money is like a god!”

“And what about the honor code? Whitebeard doesn’t allow slaves.”

“Flying his flag and dealing slaves underneath it…I suppose it doesn’t reflect so

well on that old geezer," said Oliva, cool and confident. He had something to back it up.

Ace walked over to one of the cages. A young fish-man was inside, trembling and cowering, his eyes bewildered and devoid of reason.

"So you're not afraid of Whitebeard, then."

"Why would I be afraid of someone I'm not even fighting? Everyone's always pissing their pants over 'Whitebeard this, Whitebeard

that.’ We don’t need *two* pirates on this island!”

“Two pirates…” That was all that Ace needed to hear. “So who’s backing the slave trade on this island then?” He glared at Oliva.

The man before them was the ostensible leader of the island, but one man alone couldn’t pull off an operation like this.

Swoosh… There was a great rustling around the tent. It sounded like a large group of

people surrounding the perimeter—probably Oliva's men.

Oliva handed his midsized bag to the woman.

"Say…you one of Whitebeard's men?"

"Nope," said Ace. "I'm not Whitebeard's, but I know his code. There's no slave trade under his flag. I can turn a blind eye to everything you've been doing. Just fold up this tent, come clean to

Whitebeard, and apologize," he warned.

"If you ain't one of Whitebeard's men, then why are you doin' his dirty work for him?"

"I've been eating his food."

"What?"

"And I've got to work to pay for my meals."

Ace had displayed his own moral code. It wasn't about gain or loss. It was about upholding the pirate's way.

"Why don't you come and eat on my dime, then? There's a festival tonight. Or are you thinkin' my food's not good enough for you?"

Ace waited.

"There are three other Emperors aside from Whitebeard, you know? In fact, you don't even gotta fixate on the Jolly Roger at all. There are corrupt countries, dirty Naval officers looking for side business, and even Celestial Dragons…"

There had to be someone else behind this…

"Oh, I see now…" said Ace. "You sold the territory."

"Technically, I've been in talks to see if I could receive ritual cups from *them* instead."

It was hard to believe. But this was indeed the source of Oliva's confidence. At the very least, this was what led him to act this way. He was selling out the ritual oath his own

father made with Whitebeard to someone else…

"If you've got cups from two sources, then that means you follow two parents. Your old boss received a cup from Whitebeard. So as his heir, that means that symbolically speaking, your father's father is Whitebeard. And now you're receiving a ritual cup from someone else? You know that's—"

"That's a serious offense."

The air positively crackled. The voice that emerged from the wooden box set all the caged animals stirring uneasily.

The cart trembled, and then its wheels abruptly burst off.

Crak-crak-crak-crak! A large creature emerged, breaking out of the wooden box from the inside.

“A bear?!” cried the hoodlum.

“No, man, that’s obviously a festival mask,” Ace sighed.

The face wore a bear mask as part of a costume, but there was a human being behind it.

"Whoa, that's a big one. You sellin' him, too?" Oliva said, surveying the enormous bear-faced man, who stood a full two heads taller than him.

"Hey, you little brat! You really gonna waste the cup you received from Whitebeard?" snapped the man.

"What?"

“Hey, why did you bust out?!” Ace snapped at the man in the bear mask—Teech.

“What?” said Teech, turning atop the broken cart to look at Ace. “Why? I mean, why not? It was, uh, whaddaya call it… The moment was right!” There was a fiery desire to fight in his eyes.

They knew where the slaves were being kept, and they knew what Oliva was up to. Now was the time to set things straight.

Wallace and the other pirates who had pulled the cart in removed their own shackles and picked up weapons hidden inside the boxes. Meanwhile, Oliva's forces rushed into the tent from the outside.

"Aaagh!" the hoodlum shrieked. Banshee removed her own shackles too, and threw him aside so she could get back to Ace.

The pirates surrounded Oliva, and Oliva's troops surrounded the pirates.

"Oh, we're makin' a killing tonight. You were settin' a trap for me from the start! Very bold move…but I've got hundreds of armed men out there, with more arriving by the minute."

"I don't care how many hundreds you have," snarled Ace.

"Without a flag for them to fly over their heads, they're all

a worthless rabble… *Zeha ha ha ha*!” Teech laughed. He was ready to let loose with his fists at any moment.

But it was Ace who gave the final notice. “So, Oliva… You’re not going to apologize, then?”

“Why the hell would *I* be the one to apologize?! I’m gonna tie weights to all yer feet and toss ya into the depths! Hey, you…go and unleash the secret weapon!” Oliva commanded. His secretary

rushed away and pulled a lever on one of the cages.

Clank! The heavy lock on the massive cage clicked and opened.

Brrrrmmmm…

"Ah!"

A black shadow rushed forward, quick as lightning. There was a massive impact, and Ace was thrown clear through the tent fabric and into the night.

Ace traced a burning line through the sky, his body already halfway turned to fire, and recovered his balance in time to land on his feet.

"What was that?!" he exclaimed, turning back to the tent in shock.

"That's an entelodont! A hell-pig!" roared Oliva's underlings.

"Get them! That beast will attack and devour anything it sees! It's a carnivorous pig!"

“We’re supposed to be shipping that one to Impel Down! To it, humans are just a meal!”

In terms of size, it was about the equal of a rhinoceros. It was porcine, and looked like a warthog, with long tusks and sharp teeth.

“Aaaagh! Don’t run at *us*!” screamed Oliva’s men, as the entelodont began to charge in their direction.

“Serves you right, you idiots,” muttered Ace, putting himself into the path of the charging beast.

Brrmmmmm…

Doom!

Ace extended his palm toward the entelodont, which abruptly stopped short in its charge. The bristling, snarling beast suddenly calmed, as though under a magic spell. It sat down on the ground and looked at Ace with eyes that

were bigger and cuter than they had initially seemed.

"Whoa, whoa… Heh, why am I saying that? You're not a horse. What are you supposed to say to calm down a pig? I guess it doesn't matter," Ace said. He rubbed the snout of the now tame entelodont.

It was Haki. The force of Ace's presence calmed the raging animal without it realizing what was happening.

"I guess they were poachers, or wild game

hunters. We met our wildcat Kotatsu when it was caught in a hunter’s trap in the forest. I guess they had you in a cage so they could sell you to someone else,” he said, reminiscing on how his crew came together.

Oliva’s soldiers were stunned at the sight of the young man with the nose mask who had just tamed the ferocious monster.

Ace glared at them. He didn’t bother to hide his distaste.

“You know…I don’t like people who do that sort of thing.”

Then he removed his fake nose, and let fire wreathe his hand.

“Aieeeee!”

“Is that…F-Fire Fist?!”

It was only a matter of minutes.

“*Phew*.”

The result was total annihilation. Ace used his fire powers to knock out those of Oliva's troops who were outside the tent, breaking their will to fight. Then he looked toward the circus tent.

"Oh no! Teech!"

—8—

Inside the tent was a horror scene.

Bodies lay everywhere, victims of a disaster that felled

them with overwhelming power.

Everyone who stood in the way of the man with the bear mask was now unconscious. Everyone, including the secretary and the older woman. Even the iron support pillars were leaning askew.

"*Zeha ha ha ha*…"

"Makin'…a…killing…" gasped Oliva, who was on his last legs. He had some confidence in his own skill as a fighter. But him against Teech was

truly a battle between a giant bear and a tiny monkey.

"I'm not in a friendly mood right now." Teech's fingertips squeezed. With his tremendous strength, he could crush a human neck like an apple.

"*Urg…ghl…*"

"What was that you were sayin'? The end of the era of strength? Was that it? *Zeha ha ha ha ha ha ha!*"

"Gonna make a killing…starting with…you…"

With trembling hands, Oliva still managed to point his pistol at Teech.

"*Zeha ha ha ha!* Remember this!"

Bam!!

Teech slammed Oliva's body to the floor. "All you do is talk."

"*Brmf*… !"

Oliva's entire body twitched and shuddered, driven entirely through the stage below. Teech's hand clenched harder around the man's neck.

"Would be cruel to only leave you *half*-dead…"

"That's it, Teech! We're done! Stop!" shouted Ace, appearing at last.

He had returned to find a large man wearing a bear mask looming over the young power broker who ruled this town, his flashy suit all bloodied up, pounded right through the floor.

"Ace…" said Banshee.

“Captain Ace…” added Wallace, both of them looking stunned.

“*Zeha ha ha ha, zeha ha ha ha!*”

“That’s enough,” Ace repeated.

“I don’t think so. This one tried to serve two masters. He broke the code and insulted Pops. There needs to be a reckoning,” said Teech. Among pirates, this was the reasonable way.

“That’s true. But while he might have been in the slaving business, he didn’t try to steal what was Whitebeard’s. He doesn’t understand the code. He’s just a stupid kid. He should be allowed to apologize for what he’s done and make right.”

“Make right? Not even a kid would expect mercy after disrespecting the flag!”

“Eh?”

“See, a flag is like a god! Who’s been shedding blood to

ensure Whitebeard's flag means what it does? That's right, we have! You gotta understand, money alone ain't gonna win you any wars!" Teech roared.

Ace's hands suddenly lit up with flame. "Right at the start, I said that anyone who didn't want to follow my orders should stay home."

He was dead serious. Teech recognized that, smirked…and released his death grip on Oliva's neck. Then he took the

bear mask off and grinned confidently. “What did I say earlier? I just got carried away.”

Or, in other words, *Don’t get so hot and bothered.*

“I’m your caretaker. I’ve seen what you’ve done from start to finish. All that’s left is for me to tell Pops exactly what I saw.”

“Oh, really?”

“Are you gonna challenge him again when we go back? It ain’t easy to get a leg up on

others! *Zeha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"*

The tent made a creaking sound. It wasn't going to last long. Ace gave his crewmates orders to free the slaves and animals from their cages, and the group hurriedly made their way out of the circus tent.

Chapter Six

—1—

After Oliva and his operation formally apologized to the Whitebeard Pirates for what they had done in Port Chibaralta, they closed up shop. With the matter settled, the island fell directly under Whitebeard's control, rather than under a proxy as it had previously been.

In the pirating business, concepts like good and evil do not typically apply. In order to avoid the attention of the authorities—in this case, the

World Government—most matters get handled privately between the parties involved.

This is why the law of the pirate's code exists.

A fireball of a man flew off the *Moby Dick* and into the sea once again. When he fell into the water, his fire was extinguished.

"Was that the hundredth time?"

"I think so."

The division leaders, released from the tension of the duel, finally let their thoughts out as words.

There was a crackling, singed smell floating about the deck. The duel between Portgaz D. Ace and Edward "Whitebeard" Newgate had come to a definitive end at last.

"*Gura ra ra ra…*"

Whitebeard had unleashed a small portion of the power of his Tremor-Tremor Fruit, an

ability capable of destroying the world itself. He looked down at the palm of his hand.

"Young Doc's going to scold me. I got burned in the same spot again," he said, and glanced at the surface of the water.

Thatch sensed his captain's meaning and ordered, "Someone pull him out!"

Wallace the fish-man immediately jumped into the water and scooped up the unconscious Ace before he

could sink any farther down. When Wallace popped his head back out of the water, he saw a blue flame.

"Here, grab on."

It was a bird of fire with wings outstretched. Commander Marco of the first division possessed the powers of a mythical-type Zoan fruit. He could turn into the phoenix signified by his epithet. gently.

Ace tried a hundred times, and failed a hundred times.

In the end, he could use his fiery fist to apply pressure to Whitebeard, but not to reach the top.

They brought him back onto the deck, soaking wet, and sat him with his back against the side of the gunwale. It was the same way that he'd woken up on the *Moby Dick* for the very first time.

He hadn’t gone in expecting a miracle to occur on his hundredth attempt. To Ace, this contest was no longer about winning or losing. The desire to take Whitebeard out had already left Ace’s heart, even before they fought.

It didn’t mean that he admitted he had lost.

The great man who was Whitebeard should never have been the target for Ace’s fist in the first place. It just took him a hundred losses before

he finally admitted that to himself.

It was a pointless fight.

Young people often struggle with pointless pursuits until they realize for themselves that they are pointless. And that, in fact, is the point.

If only he could have noticed it. If only he could have admitted it.

“Why does everybody call him Pops?” Ace asked.

Pops, sons… Why would a bunch of rough pirates play

family like this? Captain and crew, that's how it should be.

The leader of the first division, Whitebeard's right-hand man, contemplated this in silence before he answered, "Because he considers us his sons."

"We're just a bunch of strays and outcasts here," said Marco, smiling gently.

Because we're pirates…

Residents of the territory aside, to nearly all of the common people, the word

“pirate” was synonymous with fear. They attacked, stole, killed, and were hated and shunned for it. The people preferred the class hierarchy and order that came from the rule of the World Government, rather than the chaos of pirates, who often came out of nowhere like a natural disaster.

“So it makes us feel good, whether he really means it or not.”

Like family…

“Become my son,” Whitebeard had said, the first time he met Ace.

No way, he thought. Ace had to suffer a life ruled by hatred for the terrible father whose sins and accursed blood tainted him. As the son of a demon, he became a pirate and made a name for himself in order to drive away that nightmare, and when he thought he’d at last become free, here was *another* man trying to control him.

But now that he'd spent time as a guest of the Whitebeard Pirates, he understood the meaning of the word "son" in a different light.

Become my son. If you want to terrorize the seas, do it in my name. And Whitebeard reached out to Ace.

Would taking his hand mean surrender?

Whitebeard accepted everything. That meant that

he had been willing to sustain Ace’s companions, the Spade Pirates.

That was the greatness and generosity of the man named Edward Newgate.

The greatness…of a father.

He was a man who had created his own territory. His own sea.

He stood upon the sea and built not a system of law and justice, or fear and conquest—but a family.

Of course, it was all taken from others, everything gained by another's loss.

It wasn't about right or wrong.

Wherever Whitebeard's skull and bones flew, there was family.

Pops, sons… Those weren't just words. They weren't a game of pretend.

Though they didn't share any common blood, it was a symbolic bond they shared,

forged through sweat and blood.

Ace looked back.

He wanted to let the world know the name his mother gave him: Portgaz D. Ace. So that he could wipe away the memory of his hatred for Roger. To destroy the worthless world that killed his brother Sabo with such cruelty and callousness.

To live without regrets.

Looking back produced only memories of Sabo and Luffy.

I want to be able to look back at them—and most of all, my young self—and not feel ashamed of my choices…

Whatever form that takes.

"After the way your life was spared, you gonna keep going like this?" Marco asked his guest. "Make up your mind already. You won't be able to kill Pops in your condition. Either get off this ship and try again later, or stay…and take the mark of Whitebeard on your back!"

—3—

Later that night, Ace and his Spade Pirates gathered on the deck of the *Piece of Spadille*.

The ship had been accompanying Whitebeard's main fleet. It was given preferential treatment, as it belonged to guests of the crew, but the damage done during Jimbei's attack was still there, and the mast was nearly broken.

“Ace…”

“Captain Ace,” said his crew, prompting him to speak at last.

“I’m sorry.” He bowed to the rest of the group.

“Huh?”

“I couldn’t come to the right decision. I was naive, and therefore I’ve been keeping you all hanging in the wind. But…I’ve made up my mind now.”

Ace looked at his oldest partner. Deuce nodded and brought out a piece of cloth.

"Hey, that's…"

"It's our flag."

It was the partially torn flag of the Spade Pirates. Jimbei had torn it from its pole during their fight, but Deuce recovered the scrap during that five-day battle.

"Listen up, guys," said Ace. This was likely to be his final message to them as captain.

“As of today, at this very moment, I am disbanding the Spade Pirates. I’m taking down this flag,” he proclaimed, flag in hand.

The rest were silent.

There were only two possible options for them. Take this broken-down ship and leave Whitebeard’s territory, or stay here as members of the Whitebeard Pirates.

The former was the loser’s choice. But they would remain

independent, and have a chance to rebuild. The latter would also make them losers, in a way. They would be surrendering to Whitebeard's army.

Ace admitted his defeat. "I fought Whitebeard a hundred times, and couldn't beat him once. I've got no pride left to make me feel shame… But let me say this one thing…"

What was being a pirate about, to Ace? What was the reason he left for the sea?

What was a life without regrets, the one he swore to follow before Luffy and the late Sabo?

"I guess the reason I became a pirate wasn't for my own fame, or status, or strength…"

But what the reason really was, he was having trouble expressing.

"Ace, are you going to find what you're searching for here, in Whitebeard's territory?" Deuce asked.

“I…I think I am.”

“Why do you think that?” his partner asked. It needed to be properly said aloud, not just left unspoken.

“Because…it’s comfortable here,” Ace admitted. He was starting to like the Whitebeard Pirates.

And the rest of his crew, to varying degrees, probably felt the same way. They’d lost the fight, and by many accounts, they should have been killed. But Whitebeard spared them,

and gave them food and shelter.

"I lost a hundred times to Whitebeard. But I'm not breaking up the crew simply because I lost the fight. It's because…I owe a hundred debts of gratitude to Whitebeard."

Roger was his father. The fact that he was born at all was perhaps the one small reason for gratitude he owed his father. But Whitebeard…Whitebeard had

spared his life a hundred times.

"I haven't done a single thing to repay this debt. So I've decided to stay here with Whitebeard. And that means there's a code that we should adhere to."

I want to drink from Whitebeard's cup.

It was the summation of Ace's travels, and the final decision.

Ace waited for the others to respond. He did not rush them.

“This pirate crew…” said Skull, the first to speak.

“Yes?”

“This pirate crew raised its flag when Master Ace and Master Deu met on an uninhabited island, right? So if you two have made up your minds, then there’s nothing for the rest of us to say.”

The rest nodded along with what he said.

"It's the way of the pirating world that if the captain says something is white, then even if it's black, it's white."

"Mihal…you guys…"

Ace turned to Deuce, and they shared a look. The masked man spoke for his captain.

"I know that not all of you chose the pirating life for yourselves. If any of you have misgivings about this decision, please speak now. We'll do whatever we can for you."

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mihal? Wasn’t it your dream to be a teacher in some far-off country?” Ace asked.

“That’s right, a far-off country… Because with blue sky and a deck beneath my feet, I can teach anywhere,” he replied kindly. But there was sadness in his look too, as he prepared to say goodbye to the ship he’d guarded for so long.

The vessel that took them across the Grand Line was

terribly damaged. As the coater at the Sabaody Archipelago had told them, its life span was nearly up. Even the shipwrights of the Whitebeard crew agreed that it would be better to build a new ship than fix up this one.

There would be a disbandment ceremony. A chance for everyone to release the feelings they'd all woven into the flag of the Spade Pirates.

"Given the kind of captain you guys had, what I put into this flag—my beliefs, I guess—weren't really much to write home about."

"That's not true, and you know it."

"Deuce…" Ace murmured, looking up at his partner. Kotatsu meowed and came over to rub against his legs.

"Ace…you're a pirate, and your fists turn to fire. We came to this ship and this flag

because we admired how you live like a burning flame.”

Shouldn’t that be enough ? We were always just a bunch of naive kids and outcasts. That was all we needed.

The crew surrounded Ace, and admired their captain for who he was.

“Thanks, everyone.”

There was fire burning in his hands. The flag Ace held aloft rustled in the winds whipped up by the heat, shining and

dancing in the darkness of the night.

The time had come to bid farewell to their ship.

"Goodbye, *Piece of Spadille*."

"It was a good home, Ace."

"Yes it was, Deuce."

He gave the order to disembark. Ace and his crewmates then saw the burning ship off on its final journey.

It was an auspicious day.

The deck of the *Moby Dick* was swept clean of dust, and Whitebeard's jolly roger flew tall and proud above.

It was time for the ritual of cups.

Upon a wooden stand was arranged a bottle of liquor, a smaller jar for pouring, the wide and flat cups, a ceremonial pile of salt for good luck, and a pair of red sea bream.

The division leaders and other principal members of the Whitebeard crew lined the scene. Deuce and the other Spade Pirates waited on the lower part of the deck as the star of today's event, Portgaz D. Ace, proceeded toward the stage.

He had taken off his hat for once, and removed his weapons and the beaded necklace as well. He was entering pure of body and spirit.

“This is the ritual of taking oaths through cups. It will be a more informal version of the full ritual,” said the master of the ceremony, a man dressed in the kabuki costume and face paint of a woman—an ancient tradition.

A ritual to bring together strangers as family. To have them swear on the sea itself that they would be bound as relatives. It looked very stately and grandiose, but to pirates, this was a major

occasion: the start of their second life. These little wine cups carried with them the weight of all the life ahead of them.

Edward Newgate would be the father, and Portgaz D. Ace the son.

“We will now conduct the ritual of father and son’s cups. My name is Izo, and I will be the speaker for this ceremony. Thatch will conduct the ceremony, Marco will be the

observer, and Teech will be his second…”

In this informal ceremony, as the conductor, Thatch’s job was to take the cup from the father figure, Whitebeard, and bring it to the man who was to become the son, Ace. Once Ace had drunk the ceremonial saké, he wrapped the cup in traditional paper and placed it in his pocket.

Then more saké was poured into two other cups, which made their way down the row

of division leaders to the left and right. The cups traveled from top to bottom, at which point the man on the end of each row traded those cups so that they could travel back up to the top position.

This was the trading of cups. At the end, the cups were stacked, and the entire group joined in a special clapping rhythm.

After a pause, Thatch the conductor motioned to Ace to say his part.

“Pops.”

“Yes, my son.” They said their parts, quickly and briefly.

“And so these two have now auspiciously joined together as father and son!” Izo announced, and the ship was enveloped in applause.

In addition to the Whitebeard Pirates, other crews affiliated with him had come from far and wide to be present. There were at least ten large ships congregated around them. Some of them

were probably hoping to get a glimpse of the rumored “Fire Fist.” That was how notable the event of Portgaz D. Ace taking the ceremonial cup was in the New World.

“I hear you burned your flag,” Whitebeard said to Ace.

“I did.”

“You could have kept your flag, and joined us as an affiliate crew.”

Many people chose to retain the structure of their own

crews when they became family with Whitebeard.

"To me, that wouldn't be respecting the code," Ace replied.

"I see."

"Plus…I'm fire. I turned that flag to fire in my hands, and now that fire is part of me." He held up his hands, showing off his palms.

"Ah, yes," said Marco the observer. He took it upon himself to explain to Ace the mentality of being

Whitebeard's son. "Listen, Ace, when you join us—"

"May I say something first?" Ace interrupted, taking a step forward.

"Oh?" Marco exclaimed, taken aback.

That allowed Ace to continue. He crouched slightly, turning his left shoulder toward Whitebeard—exposing the tattoo that read ASCE with the S crossed out.

"My name is Portgaz D. Ace. I received my name from the

mother to whom I owe my life. And this tattoo represents my brothers, whom I owe as well. The followers behind me…are my family. And on this day, Whitebeard…I received a ritual cup from you."

Young Fire Fist turned his back, exposing its surface.

"I leave my back open for you. To me, this cup means that I found what I was searching for, right here. And

that the time is right to bear your mark on my back. Pops…”

To bear the ideals of Edward “Whitebeard” Newgate.

To carve a tattoo of Whitebeard’s Jolly Roger onto his back, a mark that would last forever.

“*Gura ra ra ra ra!*” Whitebeard laughed, long and loud.

“This is the lesson I’ve learned.”

“Very good,” said Marco.

He clapped his hands, and another round of applause filled the air, rising into the blue sky overhead.